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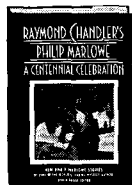
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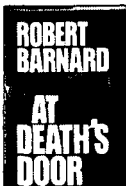
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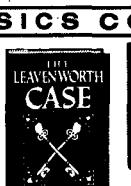
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GUEST EDITORIAL

by Holly Garrison

Is a police photographer a professional photographer employed by the police department to take photographs at the scene of a crime? Or is this person a police officer moonlighting as a photographer, a camera-crazy law enforcer? Both? Neither? Curious about this rather confusing combination of two professions in one, I contacted the New York Police Department.

To answer the most obvious question first, a police photographer is either a sworn officer of the law—a regular police officer, then—or a civil servant—a civilian—who has a minimum of three years' experience as a professional photographer. The nature of the assignment dictates whether the officer or the civilian will perform the work.

At any type of crime scene—murder, burglary, and so on—a crime unit is responsible for collecting all pertinent evidence. The evidence can range from fingerprints to bullet holes, including, of course, any relevant corpse; each member of the crime unit must be able to handle all types of evidence-collecting. In other words, every member of the crime unit can lift fingerprints, perform ballistics tests, examine the scene, and take pictures. Thus, with all the crime unit officers experienced in every aspect of evidence-gathering, any combination of officers can arrive at the scene of a crime and collect all important data. So, in essence, *all* crime unit officers are police photographers.

A crime unit is an investi-

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gative body, and therefore only trained police officers—trained to notice more, assume less, and extrapolate enough—are directly involved in a criminal investigation. Indirectly involved, though, is the *other* kind of police photographer: the civil servant.

In each borough of New York City, a photo unit is part of the general police department. The photo unit does only non-investigative work and primarily employs civil servants—civilians. (The Manhattan unit is moving towards civilianizing completely, a move that will free police officers to do more investigative work and will also save the city money.) The unit's responsibilities are largely either administrative—which means taking mug shots, amusingly enough—or ceremonial — photographing parades to assess effective police coverage, for instance. The photo unit may also be called upon to do research work (photographic research, naturally) for investigative departments.

The intelligence division, for example, may ask the photo unit to photograph an office building — for heavy traffic areas or street visibility, perhaps—where a surveillance team may be working a few weeks later. The intelligence team will use the photographs to help to plan strategies, to devise disguises, and so on. This way, the investigative team does not waste precious time performing necessary but non-investigative work.

So, now we know: the photographer taking mug shots may not be an official police officer, but he is an integral part of the law enforcement system—a photographer with an eye for “shooting” criminals. And the police photographer at the scene of the crime is more than just a shutterbug with a strong stomach—she is an officer of the law who is performing serious investigative work and giving it her best “shot.” Get the picture?

Holly Garrison is the managing editor of AHMM.—ED.

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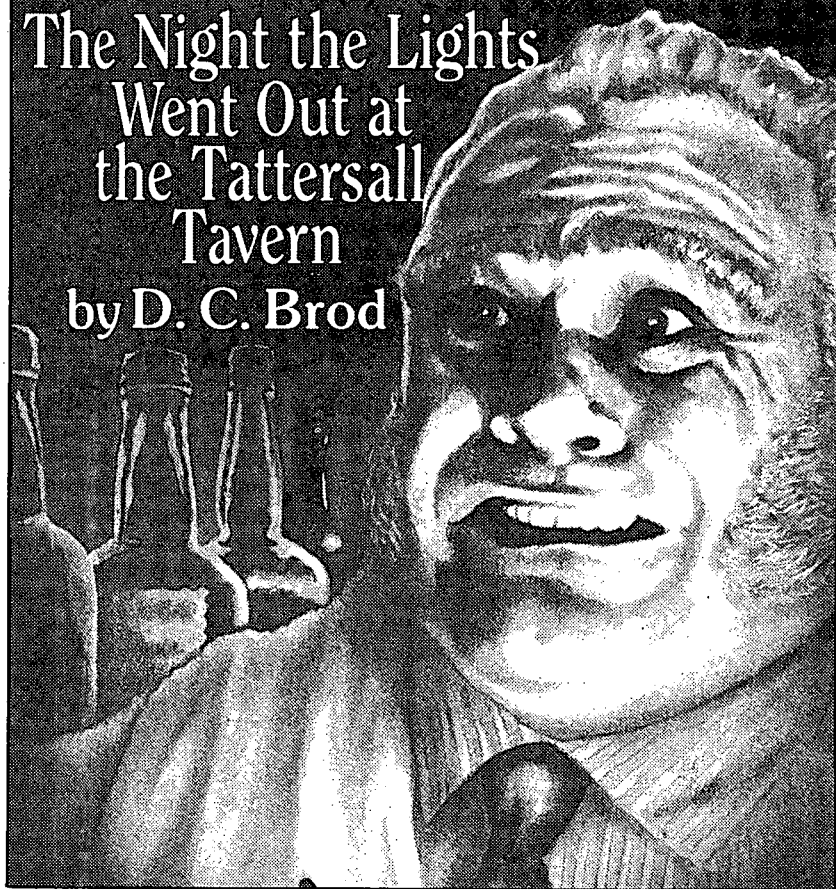
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The Night the Lights Went Out at the Tattersall Tavern

by D. C. Brod



It was the end of an era. It was the beginning of a new one. Every columnist who had anything remotely to do with sports, and many who didn't, had written about it. And almost everyone I talked to those days had an opinion to voice. So there was really very little new to say about the first

time the Cubs would play under lights in Wrigley Field. I just knew that taking an afternoon off work to catch a three o'clock game wasn't going to be the same knowing I could go to one in the evening. Progress had robbed me of my favorite guilty pleasure.

I was going to watch the

game on the wide screen TV in the Tattersall Tavern. I couldn't imagine any other place to be. Sammy MacTavish, the guy who owned the place, was the self proclaimed "world's greatest Cubs fan." And although a lot of people could have contended for that title, Sammy would definitely have been a finalist.

I got there around six that night. They had predicted rain, but you couldn't tell by looking at the sky. It was blue and muggy, the way it had been all summer, trapping in the heat and keeping out the rain. A drop of sweat slid down my back as I stepped into the manufactured coolness of the bar. It felt wonderful.

There weren't any tables for two left, so I took up one for four. Ginny quickly found me and placed a fresh basket of popcorn on the table. "Well, McCauley, is this a scotch or a Guinness night?"

"Guinness. I've gotta go the distance." I looked around the tavern, which was rapidly reaching capacity. "See a lot of new faces tonight."

"Yeah," she said and continued in her mild drawl, "let's hear it for media hype."

"Media hype?" I feigned astonishment. "Media hype? Ginny, this is Americana, pure and simple. Apple pies, hot

dogs, Chevrolets. Whatever."

She rolled her eyes. "I just hope we get through this night without someone puking on the floor."

I shook my head. "So young to be so bitter."

"I'm not kiddin'. I hate nights like this. You know, even when it's crowded, I usually know or I've seen most of the people before. And I'm here to tell you, this isn't the usual crowd."

I shrugged. "Just because it's packed?"

When she spoke again it was as though, preoccupied with the birth of her own theory, she hadn't heard me. "I'm not sure what it is. For example—" someone at a table nearby was hollering at Ginny to fill his drink order, and she gestured toward him—"that's rude. I'll get to the son of a bitch when I'm good and ready. And you see that older guy with all the gold chains and the floozy?" I glanced in that direction and noticed that the man she was referring to was apparently infatuated with Ginny's rear end. "That guy keeps putting his hands all over me when he's placin' his order. I'm a waitress, not some billy goat in a petting zoo."

I nodded solemnly, "I'd never confuse you with a goat, Ginny."

Requests for her service were getting louder now. "Well, Quint, I'd love to stay and chat,

but I'm in real demand here. Guinness, right?"

I nodded. "You keep 'em coming. I'll keep 'em down."

She left to fill the order. Sammy was hustling behind the bar, working just as hard as his full time bartender, Mark. He had the ability to talk and joke with customers while mixing drinks and drawing beers—the bartending part was just second nature. He'd owned the Tattersall for almost forty years, longer than a lot of his customers had been alive. He was mixing a concoction in a blender now—a sure sign that this wasn't the usual crowd—and arguing with Marty Shaw. I caught only snatches of the conversation but apparently Shaw was claiming that during the playoffs in '84 they'd made a bet on how long it would be before they installed lights at Wrigley Field. Sammy flatly denied it. Shaw told him he was just sore because they finally went and did it. He said the least Sammy could do was let him drink for free. Shaw wasn't a regular, but he came in occasionally and he really knew how to drive a person crazy. He was probably going to sit at the bar all night, reminding Sammy that he'd renegeed on their bet. Sammy would've been better off giving him a few drinks than listening to him whine all night.

Ginny brought my Guinness in my own mug. If you hung around the Tattersall enough and Sammy liked you, after a while he gave you your own mug. You couldn't buy one, one day Sammy would just deliver your drink in it. He kept all these mugs on a shelf above the liquor bottles, separate, of course, from *the* mug. That mug even looked different from the rest, being heavier and larger and at least twenty-five years old. It was the mug used by Ernie Banks and it was Sammy's prized possession. Banks had come through town in the early sixties, probably to do some fishing in the Fox River, and he stopped with a couple friends at Sammy's place for a beer. Sammy still got flustered telling that story, and no one who met him lasted more than five minutes without hearing it. "Finest man I ever met. Why, just talking to him, you could tell that guy had something magic going for him." Sammy said he could tell you what kind of beer Ernie drank, but he wouldn't. Said he didn't think he owed anyone free advertising. I think maybe he just wanted to keep one little nugget of that encounter to himself. So there that beer mug sat, in its case next to the bar like some kind of religious icon. And, maybe for Sammy, that's

what it was. To him, baseball represented everything that was true and pure about the world. The Cubs were the best part of it and Ernie Banks was the Cubs. And the mug. Well, the mug said it all for him.

I noticed Sammy talking to a group of four standing at the bar. One in particular stood out. She wore a white sleeveless dress that just sort of hung on her without giving her body much definition. Her hair was very blonde and seemed all the more so against her tanned skin. I silently placed a bet on the odds that Ginny would card her. I wasn't figuring on my own odds with this young lady, however. I was just admiring. Almost twenty years separated us and she probably wasn't in the market for a used private detective. But she looked so young and healthy and crisp in that dress with her hair falling loose against her back. I figured that this was the reason young men tried to hit balls out of a park. She was with two men and one other woman, who was attractive but wore slacks and a tube top and, for some reason, was nowhere near as captivating. The two guys both wore cool cotton numbers and probably would have had cardigans tied around their necks had the weather allowed. They wore their hair short and slicked

back with some kind of gel so it looked wet.

The blonde woman was listening to something Sammy was saying, nodding and smiling as he spoke. He pointed to the case with Ernie's mug in it and her mouth dropped open in either frank or exaggerated admiration. The entire group was listening to Sammy's story, but he might have been talking only to her. I couldn't blame him. That's exactly how I would have done it, too.

The bar quieted down while we all watched the screen as an old guy pushed the light switch at Wrigley Field. Actually, I guess it was all symbolic. Some Cubs' employee was probably in the bowels of the park madly yanking switches, cackling, and muttering "take that you Citizens United for Baseball in the Sunshine" as he performed the godlike act. If we were expecting a sudden blaze of electricity, we were all disappointed. The lights came on slowly and I don't know about anyone else but I'm not sure I noticed when it finally happened.

"Hey, Quint. Knew I'd find you here." Mike Richardson, computer magician and weightlifter, sat down in an empty chair across from me. "Glad you got here early for a good table." He looked around the room, craning his neck for a glimpse

of Ginny. "Is it a zoo here tonight, or what?"

I pointed to the TV screen. "History, Mike. Pay careful attention. Your grandchildren are going to quiz you on this."

"They'll be lucky if they make it through five innings," he said. "The sky's ready to bust open." He helped himself to a bunch of popcorn. Outside, there was a flash of light. The responding thunder was lost in the noise of the bar. Ginny placed Mike's beer mug in front of him. "Thanks, Gin," he said looking up at her. "Havin' a good time tonight, babe?"

She scowled and said, "If that guy with the flooze gets any more personal, we're gonna have to start charging him extra."

"What guy?" Mike said. "What flooze?"

"You know," she said, "I didn't give a damn when they decided to put up lights, but if I'd known it was gonna bring the weirdos of the world out, well, I might have joined the protestors." She looked at my mug. "You doin' okay?" I nodded and she said, "See ya later."

I was aware of movement at the table to my left against the wall and when I turned I saw that it was now occupied by the handsome foursome. The blonde woman was checking out the room, and her date pulled closer to her and placed his arm on the back of her chair. He whispered

something in her ear that caused her to pause in her surveillance, but only for a moment. She laughed a distracted, forced laugh and continued her appraisal of each person in the bar. When she got to me, seeing that she had my attention, she smiled and raised her eyebrows a fraction. Then I realized I had her date's attention, too.

I turned away and caught Mike watching me. "I don't mean to state the obvious, buddy, but that's not healthy."

Shrugging, I said, "It's my way of staring into the jaws of death."

"Yeah, right," he said, turning toward the table and trying to get her attention.

It was almost game time and the place was packed. The Chicago Symphony Orchestra, in shirtsleeves with their collars open, played the national anthem. Then Sammy made everyone shut up when Ernie Banks and Billy Williams each made the ceremonial first pitch.

A tanned, burly guy wearing a tank top and shorts approached our table. His hair was something between blond and brown and on the sparse side. He had a mustache that ended in two points directed at the floor or whatever was south of him at the time. Like I said, he was burly but without any apparent fat. I figured him to be a construction worker who

moonlighted as a bouncer. Or something like that. He carried a stein of beer, and from the way he was walking it was my guess it wasn't his first. He stopped at the table and said, "The old guy at the bar said you probably wouldn't mind if I sat with you guys."

I wasn't anxious to spend the game with a drunk. I could have done that at the ball park, but I figured that was prejudging. "Sure," I said. He introduced himself as Carl and looked around the pub, nodding his approval. "Not a bad place," was all he said, like he felt obligated to compliment us, his hosts, on our surroundings. When he found the blonde at the next table he returned her smile, not at all self-conscious to have been caught looking. "Who's that wimp she's with?" he asked the table without taking his eyes off her. Now she was starting to get a little uneasy and she looked away. Carl's smile widened, and he looked at Mike and me. "I love playing chicken."

Mike drank off his beer and looked around for Ginny, lifted his glass when he got her attention, and turned back to us. "We're not sure, but we think her date's a Phillies' instigator. Sent here to laugh at us when the Cubs lose."

"Naw," Carl said, finishing half his beer in one large swal-

low, "won't happen. Not tonight." When Ginny brought Mike's beer, Carl ordered another.

The noise in the tavern was reduced to a murmur when Sutcliffe threw his first pitch. It was a ball and the umpire deftly handed it to someone in the Cubs dugout—no doubt it was destined for retirement as the first ball thrown at a night game in Wrigley Field. Two pitches later was the first pitch that resulted in a home run in Wrigley Field. We all groaned and shared Sutcliffe's misery. Someone suggested turning the lights out.

The mood of the crowd picked up in the bottom of the first when the spectacularly endowed Morganna ran, as best she could, onto the field to plant a kiss on her favorite second baseman. She was stopped short of her goal. Then Sandberg, either out of elation or relief, knocked one into the bleachers. With one on base we were ahead two to one, but doom was rumbling outside the window. The storm had hit Foxport and it was just a matter of time, probably minutes, before it moved past the burbs and hit Chicago.

The dust on the diamond was starting to swirl by the third inning and those not under cover in Wrigley Field who were still capable of rational thought were probably considering the

best spot to wait out a rain delay. The rains came during a commercial so, like the turning on of the lights, I wasn't aware it had happened until it was supremely obvious.

Everyone got their moaning out of the way and there was a flurry of orders for refills as we prepared to wait out the delay. Then the lights flickered and went out. The reaction was stronger than when Bradley hit a home run in the first inning. Stone silence, then hoots and yells. Finally a voice, Sammy's, rose above the rest, instructing us, "Don't anybody panic. We got flashlights. We'll wait this out with the folks at the park." I didn't want to be the one to tell him that the folks at the park were one up on us in the light department.

Carl's chair made an ugly sound as he pushed back from the table. He said under his breath, "No offense, guys, but this table ain't the one where I want to spend a power outage." He moved away, toward the table with the blonde.

Mike leaned toward me. "This is great. He figures he's got a chance now that she can't see him."

It was pitch dark. The streetlights had gone out as well as the interior lights. A few people struck matches and ignited lighters, but Sammy, fearing a

lit match on the floor, begged everyone to wait until the flashlights arrived. "I'll bet poor Ginny's in the back room digging through cabinets in the dark," I said to Mike.

It was strange. A crowd that had been healthy and rowdy a few minutes ago was reduced to whispers with the absence of light. If the conversation level had been normal, we might not have heard the high pitched squeal, "Peter!"

Mike laughed softly. "Sounds like Carl found his mark."

Then another voice. "Gwen? Gwen, where are you?"

"Peter? Where are *you*? Wasn't that you? What the hell's going on?" The voice wasn't raised any more but, even at a normal level, it projected well. A few people, including Mike, were starting to chuckle now.

"I'm right here, honey." The man's voice was a loud whisper. "Don't get upset."

"Don't get upset? Some ape just tried to cop a feel and you're telling me not to get upset."

"Gwen," it was another woman's voice and by now I could tell the entire conversation was coming from the table with the blonde. "Gwen, someone might have just brushed up against you. I mean it's dark in here and all."

"My ass. You think I don't

know when I'm being felt up?"

"Gwen!" This came from Peter as the laughter surrounding the table rose above a chuckle.

"Okay, everybody." It was Sammy, an expert at defusing situations like this. He was at the table with the two couples. "Everybody stay sitting down and nobody's gonna be where they aren't supposed to be." From the sound of it, there were a lot of people table hopping and falling over chairs.

"Don't tell *me* that." It was Gwen. "Tell that ape."

Sammy hollered, "Ginny, what's keeping you?"

"You've got a mess back here, Sammy," came Ginny's muffled reply.

Moments later the lights came back on and a cheer went up. Visibly relieved, Sammy returned to the bar. "Keep lookin', Ginny."

"I could use some help, you know. After all, this is your mess back here." Sammy joined her in the back and Mark was besieged with orders at the bar. If the lights were to go out again, everyone wanted to have a good supply of booze to get them through the ordeal. Marty Shaw helped himself to a large glass of liquor someone had left on the bar. The guy with the chains was looking around, probably for Ginny. Carl was back at our table finishing the

basket of popcorn. His smile said it all and, from the icy looks the blonde, since identified as Gwen, was giving him, he'd been made. I was having serious doubts about this guy who'd joined us, and was trying to think of a subtle way to get him ejected.

Before I could think of a good way to do it, the lights sputtered and died again. Everyone groaned. I leaned toward Carl. "Try staying in your seat this time, okay?"

His grunt was noncommittal.

I went up to the bar to see if I could help Mark, who was having a lot of trouble explaining to many of the patrons that he was powerless to tap a beer without electricity. "What are you talking about?" a disembodied voice cried. "I can't drink bottled beer."

"Well, right now, that's all I've got," Mark said.

The voice hesitated, then said, "Okay. I'll take a Bud."

"You'll have to take whatever he grabs first," I said. "The labels don't glow in the dark." I tried to help Mark with orders, but we soon realized the futility of it. "Look," I said, "there's no way we can do this until we at least get the flashlights."

That was met with mutters and groans and I heard Mike Richardson, who had moved up

to the bar, say, "Everybody sit down, okay. Sit down or go to another bar that has lights." Apparently a few people decided that was an excellent idea because I could hear chairs scraping the floor and people moving toward the door.

"We could sure use those flashlights," Mark said loud enough for Sammy and Ginny to hear.

As if in response, what sounded like a truckload of boxes crashed to the floor in the back room. There were a few seconds of silence, followed by a moan. Mike and I felt our way down the bar and into the back room.

"Jeez, Ginny, you okay?" Sammy was saying, shoving boxes this way and that.

I'd worked a few nights for Sammy when Mark couldn't make it in, and I knew what Ginny was up against. Sammy's storage room was a disaster area and was something to be feared if you couldn't see where you were going. Sammy called out to Ginny again.

"I'm under seven boxes, and I'm okay. But it'd serve you right if I'd busted my head. I'd sue you, you know."

"Oh, Ginny." Sammy spoke like he was scolding a child and began to move the boxes, mostly empty, that surrounded her. "Did you find the flashlights?"

"I'll give you a flashlight,"

Ginny started to say but never finished because the lights flashed back on. Another cheer went up. "Is it still raining at the park?" Sammy yelled into the bar.

A chorus of "yeeses" responded.

Ginny brushed herself off and straightened her apron. Then she looked at Sammy and said as she walked back into the bar, "You'd better find the flashlights in case we lose the lights again."

Sammy looked to us and I said, "One per table ought to be enough." We found seven flashlights in a half disintegrated paper bag jammed into the back of a cupboard. "If these work," I said, "it'll be a miracle."

"That's okay," Sammy said, "I got batteries around here somewhere." That was when Mike and I returned to our table.

We settled down to our drinks. Carl had cleaned up most of the popcorn, but I picked at the last few kernels while we watched Governor Jim Thompson being asked insightful questions in the press box. Carl shook his head. "What an operation."

Ginny seemed to have recovered from her mishap and was dodging the guy with the hands, and Sammy was rummaging behind the bar. Gwen, who now had a light blue

sweater draped over her shoulders, and the rest of her table were laughing about something.

I had turned my attention back to the TV when I heard it. At first I thought it was a crack of thunder, and an instant later, I knew better. Sammy was standing in front of the bar with a .45 automatic in his right hand. I looked around for a body and, seeing none, I stood. "What's going on, Sammy?"

Something hard and foreign had taken over Sammy's expression. His jaw tightened and his eyes narrowed. He looked at Mike and me, then slowly swept his gaze across the room. When he finally spoke, he spat out each word. "Some worthless piece of crap took the mug."

The response was stunned silence. Half the room knew the gravity of that act, and the other half didn't know what in the hell he was talking about and thought he was probably crazy.

I walked over to the mug's display case. It was, indeed, empty. And it wasn't among the mugs on the rack above the bottles.

When Sammy spoke again, he said, "Nobody leaves here until that mug is back in its case, unscratched." His voice had a dangerous quality to it,

as though he were daring someone to make a break for the door. That got a reaction. Several people muttered something about what in the hell he was doing and started to get up. Sammy put another hole in the floor. I called the police.

Sammy was still standing in front of the bar. I walked up to him and said, "I've called the cops. They're on their way. No one's going to leave." He was studying groups at each table, looking for signs of guilt. I didn't know whether he'd heard me. "Nobody's going to leave." I looked at the crowd in the room. "Nobody's going to leave, right?" Everyone nodded.

Sammy glanced over his shoulder. "Where's Shaw?"

I looked around. Shaw was gone. Did he consider the mug fair payment on the alleged wager? Maybe, but if I were to agree with Sammy, he was liable to march over to Shaw's house and blast him out of his socks.

"Look," I said, "I've got an idea. Sammy, why don't you turn around, back to these people, and we'll give whoever took the mug the opportunity to return it with no questions asked. Okay?"

Sammy finally looked at me. "No way. I want his ass."

All eyes were on him and even the regulars were looking

nervous. We needed a diversion, but I didn't think there was a soul in the place ready to challenge the little man with the gun. As it turned out, I had underestimated the powers of alcohol. Or maybe it was simply a matter of innate stupidity that made Carl look around the room and, gesturing with a bottle of beer, say, "I don't know about the rest of you, but I'm not gonna let some whacked out old jerk tell me what I can and can't do." He stood and Mike positioned himself between Carl and the door. Size-wise they were a pretty even match. "Man," Carl said to Mike, setting the bottle down, "don't make me do this."

"Do what?" Mike smiled.

The bottle shattered and Carl looked with disbelief at Sammy. "You're nuts, old man. You're completely nuts." Nuts or not, he must have made his point because Carl sat down again.

Fortunately, Sergeant Julius Crowley chose that moment to arrive. We were happy to hand the show over to him. Foxport isn't what you'd call a big town. The police force is small and they know all the businesses and the people who run them. I was glad Julius had answered the call. He'd been on the force on that day Ernie Banks walked into the Tattersall Tavern.

Sammy looked at him and

said in a dangerously even tone, "I want you to arrest that son-of-a-bitch and I want him to get the maximum sentence. And if anything's happened to that mug, I want him to get the chair."

"Who you talking about, Sammy?" Julius asked.

"Marty Shaw."

"Who's looking for me?" Shaw entered the bar with his hand against the wall as if he were still groping his way in the dark. He'd apparently come from the john and he was holding his stomach with his other hand. "God, what was in that funny-colored drink?"

Behind the bar, Mark laughed and shook his head, but didn't answer him.

"You got my mug!" Sammy said.

Shaw lowered himself into a chair, groaning, "What mug?"

After calming Sammy down somewhat and asking Mike and me about the power outage and what happened afterwards, Julius gave the bar the once-over, then lowered the volume on the TV (Stone and Staats were interviewing some actor) and said to the crowd, "We're gonna have to search everyone." He held up his hands as the objections came. "Something of value has been stolen here, and we'd just like to take a look in bags and anything big enough to carry it."

Carl stood up as best he could. "Well, I guess I can go. Don't have anything a mug would fit in."

"You're not going anywhere," Julius said. It wasn't his size or what he said that made Carl back off. It was the way he said it.

"Hey, man." Carl looked at the crowd, imploring, "Man, this is so stupid. I got rights. Don't I have some civil liberty or something that's being violated here?"

"Shut up and sit down," Julius said.

Carl did and Julius recruited Mike and me to help him. We went from table to table, looked through purses and bags and knapsacks, and came up with nothing. I had the pleasure of rousting Gwen's table and the lady herself graced me with a smile as she handed her purse over to me.

By the time we finished, they had run out of celebrities to interview at Cubs Park and were talking to Jim Frey. Sammy, having been relieved of his gun by Julius, paced behind the bar, hands in his pockets and that look of grief mixed with rage clouding his eyes. Every couple of laps he'd stop and look out at the crowd. Maybe he was looking for some kind of sign or maybe he was just not believing that someone he welcomed into

his establishment could do such a thing.

I studied everyone in the room and tried to think if anyone had left for any amount of time, and I remembered that some people had left in search of a bar with lights. If one of those people had taken it, we were out of luck. If the person had simply stashed the mug, probably in a car, and returned, then there was still a chance. But why return? Maybe that person wasn't alone. I glanced at the TV screen. Cubs' catcher Jody Davis and three cohorts were amusing the audience by sliding across the rain-drenched tarp that covered the field. They looked like big, white, numbered seals. And the downpour continued. There was no way someone could have left this building dry and returned dry. Julius stepped next to me, watching the scene, too. "Hasn't let up there, has it?" he said.

I looked at Julius and it finally occurred to me that he hadn't worn a raincoat. "Julius, was it raining when you got here?"

"No. It let up for about twenty minutes. I just looked out the door, though. It's pouring now."

Not that I didn't believe him, but for some reason I had to see for myself. He was right. I stood and watched the rain pelt a dark-colored BMW parked di-

rectly across the street and tried to think if there was something I'd missed. Nothing came to me and I could feel the spray from the rain as it poured down on the steps. I left the door open and walked back into the room. Julius said to me, "I'm going to have to let these people go if they want to. Can't hold them without reason." He looked at Sammy, still pacing behind the bar, and shook his head. "God, what a lousy thing to do. Lousy."

Gwen was watching me and I was close enough to notice that the blue of her eyes was only slightly darker than the blue in the sweater, which now lay folded on the table. I held her gaze for a moment and noticed that Peter was ignoring the fact that someone was looking at his woman. I turned to Julius. "Give me three minutes."

He looked at me and shrugged.

I stepped up to Gwen's table and said to Peter, "You were outside, weren't you?"

He looked at me for a long time before he said, "I never left this room." He indicated the others at the table. "They can vouch for me." Confident of their backing, he said to me, "What's it to you, anyway? I don't remember anyone making you a deputy."

I looked at Gwen, then at her

sweater. "You didn't come in with that sweater. Did you?"

Gwen smiled. "Were you taking pictures?"

"What are you getting at?" Peter jumped to her defense, blissfully ignorant of the fact that she was doing a lot better without him.

"I think," I looked up and was pleased to note that everyone within hearing distance, including Sammy, was listening to this, "I think that you went out to the car to put something in it and you brought back the sweater in case the lights came on before you got back."

"And I think you've got a pretty vivid imagination," Peter said.

"Will you let us look in your car?"

He was indignant now. "Why the hell should I?"

Carl stepped up to their table, smiled and nodded to Gwen, and grabbed Peter by his collar. "Because we're all sick of sittin' here. And if this jerk," he gestured toward me, "is gonna be happy once he sees the inside of your car, then I think you oughta let him." He dropped Peter back into his chair.

Peter looked at the crowd and then at me. I smiled. "I couldn't have said it better myself."

After a long hesitation and a couple of frustrated gestures, Peter dug his keys out of his

pocket. "You people are nuts," he muttered.

Julius and I walked with Peter to his car. Mike had to use physical force to keep Sammy from joining us. I wasn't surprised when it turned out to be the BMW. In the time it took to cross the street we were all soaked. Peter watched as Julius and I thoroughly searched the vehicle. We came up empty. Peter seemed pleased with himself and delighted that Julius was more than a little annoyed with me. "Can my friends and I leave now?"

Julius looked at me and said under his breath, "Don't think we had any reason to keep him here in the first place." Then he said to Peter, "Sure, you can go."

"Thank you," Peter said with exaggerated graciousness.

I gave the car one more glance and turned toward the pub. As I turned, my shoe scraped against something. I crouched down to examine what I'd hit and picked up a glass handle from a beer mug. One look at Peter, and I knew this wasn't just any glass handle from just any beer mug. Julius caught Peter's expression, too. I stood in the rain and stared at the guy, the handle looped in the crook of my finger. After a few seconds, he looked away and said, "Hey, it was wet. It was

slippery. I was going for my keys. I didn't break the damned thing on purpose." When neither Julius nor I responded, he said, "Look, did I break the law? Am I under arrest?"

Julius shook his head and looked back at the bar.

When we walked back in, Sammy hurried up to us. "Was it in there? Did he have it?" There was such a mixture of hope and dread in his voice that I was at a loss as to how to tell him. As it turned out, I didn't have to. He saw the handle attached to the jagged shard of glass. Then he looked to me for confirmation.

"I'm sorry, Sammy," was all I could say and I handed it to him.

I was prepared to have to keep Sammy from killing Peter. And I was thinking that maybe I shouldn't interfere. I was not prepared for what happened next. Sammy's rage I could have handled, but his total devastation was something else. He sank into the chair that someone had vacated for him and, at the same time, he seemed to almost cave in to himself. It was like someone had pulled the plug and everything that buoyed and sustained him was escaping.

Ginny placed a scotch in front of him and handed Julius and me bar towels. I wiped my face

and rubbed some of the rain out of my hair.

Peter realized that everyone in the room was glaring at him. "Hey," he said, "it's just a mug, for Christ's sake. What's the big deal?" Peter was real lucky this was late twentieth century suburban Chicago because if it'd been Dodge City in the 1800's he'd have been swinging from a tree.

I glanced over at his table of friends to see how they were taking it. As soon as Gwen realized she was being watched, she stood up and grabbed her purse and sweater. "For God's sake, Peter, that was stupid."

Peter looked at Gwen in stunned disbelief. Then he nodded to himself, like he just got the joke and, without raising his voice, said, "For God's sake, bitch, you were the one who wanted it." Reddening, she quickly turned away from him. That said it all.

"I think you and your friends had better leave," Julius said to Peter, who tossed some bills on the table and, without a word, turned and walked out ahead of his friends. Gwen was the last of her group to leave

and, holding her head high, even when Carl barked at her, walked out the door like some kind of princess going to her coach. I would not have blamed the coach for leaving without her.

After that the bar cleared out pretty fast. Mike and I sat with Sammy, and Ginny brought us a couple of beers. He stared at the wide screen TV he'd purchased especially for his patrons to enjoy the Cubs games. He talked some, mostly about Banks, always about the Cubs. It wasn't in his usual animated way, though, more like he was talking about a good friend who had just died. At one point he said, "It was more than a mug, you know."

I watched the rain pouring down over the lights that illuminated the vacant diamond and I thought about baseball in the sunshine and girls in their summer dresses. "Traditions," I said. "They're very fragile." Sammy looked at me and nodded.

We watched until they officially called the game around ten thirty. Sammy closed early that night.

FICTION

From Zaire to Eternity

by Charles
Ardai



Illustration by Patricia Olstad

The morning mail held two surprises for Dan Reed. The first was a letter from his sister Evelyn, from whom he hadn't heard in almost a year. The second was a hundred-carat diamond.

Evelyn had been married (she wrote) on the eve of her eighteenth birthday, to an actor named Kyle Nuys. They were taking a honeymoon in Africa, to coincide with the start of the First Annual Pan-African Tennis Consortium and Tournament, upon the conclusion of which they were to return to North Hollywood and a life ever after of marital bliss.

The letter closed with a mention of bad weather, standard queries after Dan's health, and the assurance that when she returned Evelyn would insist on spending at least a week in New York with her big brother. At the bottom of the page was the parenthetical postscript, "(Evelyn Nuys! I'm still not used to it!)"

And then there was the package.

It was not evident at first that the package contained a hundred-carat diamond. It seemed, in fact, to contain a tennis ball. Tennis balls do not rattle, however, as this one did, and they have a certain peculiar heft that this one did not. And generally, when one re-

ceives a tennis ball in the mail, it is accompanied by a note of explanation, or at least a return address. This one was not.

So, after looking at the ball for several minutes, listening to the sound it made when shaken, and tossing it from hand to hand, Dan pulled a steak knife from his lower desk drawer and sliced the ball neatly in half. A bright, glittery, *huge* cut diamond clattered onto Dan's desk. Dan dropped the remnants of the tennis ball into his trash can.

Dan had not seen many diamonds in the course of his investigations, and none of his other professions paid well enough to afford him such luxuries. He held the stone up to the light. Judging by its size, few professions would. But he knew one thing: this monster gem was no trifle.

Where had it come from? The tennis ball suggested Evelyn, who was an avid tennis fan; she had spent the previous four years traveling the world in pursuit of exotic matches, first with their mother and then alone from age sixteen on. The stamps and postmark confirmed Dan's suspicion: they matched those on the letter, both having originated in Zaire.

Zaire. Home of the world's second largest diamond-mining industry. Ditto a prominent

diamond smuggling industry, mostly through South Africa. Ditto, evidently, the First Annual Pan-African Tennis Consortium and Tournament.

And ditto Evelyn Nuys, eighteen-year-old would-be diamond smuggler. Typically, without Mom around to keep an eye on her, Evelyn had gone and done something illegal. Only now, at eighteen, she was old enough to be thrown in jail, or worse.

She wouldn't be, though. Dan had confidence in his sister. Unless she was slowing down in her old age, catching Evelyn wouldn't be easy, holding her even less so. She had certainly escaped from home quickly enough, and diamond smugglers could hardly be more tenacious than her mother had been, following her all over the globe. Of course, smugglers might be more violent . . .

Dan turned the diamond this way and that, watching the light flicker off its facets. Why did she send it to me? he wondered. And how did she get it out of the country? The box the ball came in would have cloaked the rattling, but didn't the authorities notice that the ball weighed more than it should have?

For that matter, where had she gotten the diamond? Zaire might have many mines, but

Dan doubted there were diamonds littering the tennis courts. And this Kyle Nuys—did he realize what he was getting into, marrying a self-proclaimed swindler, rogue, and criminal genius? Poor fellow, if he should turn out to be the quiet, sedentary sort.

A knock on the door drew Dan from his thoughts. The silhouette on the other side of the frosted glass was bulky and rectangular. Dan let his hand drop, slid the diamond into his pocket, pulled his control box out of a desk drawer, and flicked the uppermost of its six toggle switches.

On the door, the words "Dan Reed" lit up. Beneath Dan's name were five lines of text, each in a circle of neon tubing:

AAARMCHAIR DETECTIVE
AGENCY

ACE COMPUTER CONSULTING

AARON LLOYD'S PATENTED
SHIATSU MASSAGE

AALEXANDER THE GREAT
MAGIC/ENTERTAINMENT/
CHILDREN'S PARTIES

Dan slapped a white button on his desk to activate the intercom.

"Are you Dan Reed?"

Dan said nothing. He as-

sumed the man could read.

"Let me in," the man said. His voice was an indelicate, throaty rumble.

"What do you want?" Dan asked.

"I want to come in."

"Do you want a detective? A computer consultant? A massage? A magician?" Dan flicked the switches, highlighting each option in turn.

"I want to come in," the man repeated.

"Patience. First, tell me which—"

The man raised a fist that was roughly the size of a telephone book and smashed it through the glass. He turned the knob from the inside and let himself in.

"—service you are interested in." Dan hated to leave a sentence unfinished.

The man sat in the chair next to Dan's desk. He was tremendous and dour, an overgrown, square-jawed lizard. His arms were hairy and dark, and thick like the roots of an oak. A good foot beneath his eyes, his face ended abruptly at a blunt, stubble-coated plateau. His nose, equally square, Dan could account for as the result of too many blows; but for such a square chin Dan could imagine no culprit except an unkind twist of heredity. And even sitting down, the man towered over Dan.

Dan let him tower silently, which he did for an uncomfortable minute and a half. In time, it dawned on him that Dan was not going to speak. "Did you see what I did to your door?" he asked.

Obviously this was no mental giant, as Dan was facing the wreckage. "What do you think?" Dan asked.

"I'll do the same to you."

"You'll punch my lights out, too," Dan said. "That's wonderful. I suppose you even have a reason."

"Yes," the giant said, "and you know what it is."

"Refresh my memory." The man glowered at Dan. "Do you work for Samson Grey?"

"Who's Samson Grey?"

"Never mind," Dan said. "Just someone who's ten thousand dollars poorer than he'd like to be."

"That's why you had the diamond stolen? To pay this man back?"

"No," Dan said, "I have no intention of paying him back."

"But you admit you had the diamond stolen."

Ouch. At least now Dan knew what the man was after. Was he working for the government of Zaire or for whomever Evelyn had stolen the diamond from? Dan couldn't decide. For all he knew, the government *was* whom Evelyn had stolen the diamond from.

What a situation to be thrown into unprepared! And to think he had planned a quiet afternoon. Dan jotted a note to himself on his notepad: "Thank Evelyn for the lovely gift."

"So," Dan said, "you want the diamond."

"We know the girl sent it to you."

"Why didn't you just take it from her in Zaire?"

The man reddened, turning a shade somewhere between adobe and brick. "She eluded us."

"Why didn't you stop the package from leaving the country?"

"She prevented us."

Evelyn hadn't changed, obviously. "And you figure I'll be easier to deal with."

"Mr. Reed," the man said, "anyone would be easier to deal with." For a moment he almost sounded human.

Dan rummaged through his drawers and came up with three paper cups. He turned them onto the desk in a mouth-down row. "How about a fair exchange?" Dan asked. "I keep the diamond in return for what you did to my door." The man shook his head. Dan shrugged. "Okay. Here's the diamond."

Dan tipped the middle cup back. A small plastic diamond was under it.

"That's not it," the man said. Dan let the cup cover the dia-

mond. He lifted the other two to show them empty, then stacked them over the middle cup. Misdirection, Dan knew, was the only way out of this situation, short of surrendering the diamond.

"You have five seconds," the man said, "before I start breaking bones." Dan lifted the stacked cups. An egg had appeared under them. "Four," the man said.

Dan cracked the egg and tipped a different diamond out. It was smaller than the one that had come in the mail, and it was fake, but it was the closest match he had at hand. He squeezed the halves of the eggshell in his left hand, the diamond in his right, then held his fists out. Anything to keep the man's attention diverted...

The man wrapped his hands tightly and significantly around Dan's. "Three," he said.

Dan turned his fists over. The man relaxed his grip and Dan opened his hands. They were empty.

"Two," the man said.

Dan pulled the diamond out of the man's ear and handed it to him. "You're a tough audience."

"I hate magic," the man growled. He put the diamond in his breast pocket. "And I hate tricks. If you're pulling a trick, I'll come back and show you 'Cutting a Magician in Half.'"

At this, he laughed long and loud, as if it were the height of wit. Then he stood and left.

Go figure, Dan thought.

He opened the door behind his desk. In the back room he had a small bed, a computer, and a television. He lived in this room, saving himself the trouble of paying rent on an apartment he'd rarely use anyway.

Dan pulled a suitcase from under the bed and dug through his records. Eventually, he turned up a bill from the man who had installed his door and phoned for a replacement from the telephone by the computer. As he hung up, someone outside knocked on the front door.

Did he figure out that it's fake? Dan wondered. Is he back already? Do I have to go out?

There seemed to be no way around it. Dan returned to his desk, closing his door behind him.

Despite himself, he breathed a sigh of relief when he looked through the broken glass. The giant had not returned. (In a sudden burst of hindsight, Dan realized that if he *had* returned, he wouldn't have knocked.)

Actually, there might have been more than relief in his sigh, since his new caller was as beautiful as his previous caller had been ugly. "My name

is Diana Keeper," she said in a sweet brandy voice. "May I come in?"

"Help yourself," Dan said.

Diana Keeper reached through the smashed window and opened the door. She was taller than Dan, and thin, and blessed with a soft peach complexion, bountiful black hair that showered in waves over her shoulders, and a figure that commanded attention. It didn't hurt that she accentuated her best features in a grey, zipper-front jumpsuit unzipped past the point of discretion. But most of all, she possessed the unique beauty of youth; she radiated freshness and exuberance.

Dan gauged her to be in her early twenties. It was clear from the energy in her step, in her eyes, in the way she spoke, that life was still an adventure for her, still a grand game. Dan shook his head briskly. He was a jaded and inertial thirty-four, not old by any reckoning, but weary—and old enough for capering with a twenty-year-old nymph to be unseemly. Still, his eyes lingered above her zipper. He was not unmoved.

Aware that he was staring, Dan made a show of removing a speck from the wall behind her. She tolerated this charade, for she understood his embarrassment better even than he did. After disposing of the in-

vented speck, Dan offered her the seat so recently vacated. She elected to stand. Dan sat.

"I see Christiansen's men have been here," she said warily.

"Man," Dan corrected. "Just one big tree of a man."

"That would be Percy," Diana said.

"Percy?"

"A thug about eight feet tall, with a jaw like Dick Tracy's and a brow like a Neanderthal?"

Dan nodded.

"That's Percy," Diana said. "Percy Wheems. He hates the world. I think it's because of his name."

"And Christiansen?"

"He's a thug, too." Diana looked for a response from Dan, but received none. "He's a smuggler, a fence, specializes in diamonds and precious metals. He controls his empire from a fortress in Zaire. If anyone tries to take anything from him, he sends Percy as a warning."

"That was a warning?"

"You're still here, aren't you?"

"What does he send if he's really angry?"

Diana shuddered, a gesture Dan appreciated thoroughly. "There's a man called Cutter."

"Cutter?" Dan asked.

"It's not his name," Diana explained. "It's his job."

And I just passed a lump of plastic off as a diamond, Dan

thought. Cutting a magician in half. Now I get it.

Somehow he couldn't manage a laugh.

"I suppose," he said at last, "that you want to hire me in my capacity as head of the Aaarm-chair Detective Agency."

"Hire you?" Diana laughed. "I just want the diamond."

Dan reached into his desk drawer and pulled out three paper cups. Diana put her hands over his. "Don't play games," she said. "Just give me the diamond."

Diana's grip was by no means as threatening as Percy's, but in its way it was as effective.

"Who are you?" Dan asked. "What's your stake in this?"

A smile dashed across Diana's face, stopping briefly at her lips and her eyes. "I'm just in it for the money."

"I like money, too," Dan said. "Why should I give you the diamond?"

"I think I have something to offer you," Diana said. Her fingers strolled to her zipper and slid it an inch lower. Yes, she commanded attention. It wasn't enough to make him give up the diamond, and Dan got the feeling she knew that, but it was a sorely tempting start and Dan got the feeling she knew that, too. Dan went to her side, almost against his will.

Suddenly a dark form filled

the space that had been Dan's door. The form, and the darkness, belonged to a gaunt man wearing a brownish-red smock. He opened the door and came into the office. Two butcher's knives hung in sheaths tied to the smock's belt. This had to be Cutter.

Dan realized that Diana was no longer standing beside him. He looked back. She was lying face down on his desk.

"Are you Dan Reed?" Cutter asked.

"No," Dan said. "I'm Aaron Lloyd." He went to his desk, slipped Diana's jumpsuit down and began to knead her shoulders. "Dan's in there." He indicated the door behind the desk.

"Very good," Cutter said. He unsnapped the strap on one of the sheaths. "Go on with what you're doing," he said, staring Dan in the eye, "no matter what you hear from in there. Do you understand?" Dan nodded. "Good."

Cutter opened the door a crack, ignoring the sign that said "Employee Only." He slipped inside the room.

For all his sinister presence, this Cutter was clearly no brighter than Percy. Dan wasn't complaining. He braced himself against the desk and shoved it up against the door. He tried not to look when Diana bounced

to her feet, but he failed, and was glad—for a while, at least—that he had.

Diana yanked the front door open and ran to the stairs. Dan followed at his customary pace.

"Come on," Diana shouted. "Run!"

He reached the staircase and paused with his hand on the banister. "I don't run," he said.

From his office came the sound of his desk toppling over. "You run," Diana said.

Cutter burst through the door, a foot-long knife held high above his head. "I run," Dan said.

He ran.

They reached the first floor side by side and crashed through the staircase door. A floor behind them, they could hear Cutter clattering down the stairs in pursuit.

Dan and Diana sped out onto 34th Street, right past Percy, who was stationed by the door. Percy figured out what was happening as Cutter emerged from the building.

"Idiot!" Cutter screamed. "Get them!"

Christiansen's two goons ran after their prey, dodging across Broadway, through the crowded lobby of Herald Center, down to 32nd Street and over toward Fifth Avenue. Along the way, Diana dragged a full Dumpster into their path, gaining a half-block lead.

Dan dodged into a building labeled "6," and dragged Diana after him. Mercifully, an elevator was waiting in the lobby. Dan jabbed at the fourth floor button until the door slid shut.

"Dan," Diana said, "I think I should—"

"Not now, you shouldn't," Dan said. "We can talk later, if we lose them."

"We will," Diana said, but she fell silent.

Young and beautiful, Dan thought, also young and naive. So confident that the grand adventure would have a happy ending. There was a time when he could have looked a knife-wielding assassin in the eye and felt sure of success, but no longer. One day, she would learn. Dan hoped it wouldn't be today.

The doors opened and Dan pulled Diana into the showroom of Louis Tannen's magic shop. Ira West sent Dan a cheery wave, then dropped it when Diana bounded over the glass display cases between them. Dan took the long way around.

"What's going on, Dan?" Ira asked.

"I can't stop, Ira," Dan said. "I promise I'll explain later. For now, all you need to know is that there are two men heading up after us. Stop them, whatever it takes. Be careful—one of them's armed, and the other

one doesn't need to be."
"Armed?"

Dan clapped Ira on the back and rushed past him into the storeroom. "Just knives," he said, "but they're big ones."

"Just knives, he says," Ira said. "That's all, just knives."

Dan threaded his way among rows of metal shelves and boxes overflowing with colorful props to the freight elevator. Diana followed him and they took the elevator back down to street level.

"That was a good idea," Diana said. "I hope they'll be able to handle Percy and Cutter."

"I'm not worried about Cutter," Dan said. "Ira can handle knives. I just hope they have something strong enough to hold Percy."

"If they don't, it still bought us time. Let's get out of here."

"We probably shouldn't go back to my office," Dan said.

"No. How about my hotel room?"

How about her hotel room. That sounded promising. Dan hailed a taxi.

The elevator doors opened and Percy and Cutter crashed out. Four balls of blinding orange flame came hurtling at their heads. The fireballs vanished before reaching them, but when they could see again, they were sur-

rounded by magicians.

Ira was between them and the elevators. Two teenagers in leather and whiteface blocked the door to the stairs. A man in a tuxedo stood in the way of the storeroom entrance, flanked by his female assistants dressed in street clothes. Directly in front of Percy was a very old man in a hooded robe and sandals.

Cutter brandished one of his knives. Ira scaled a metal plate at his hand. The knife fell to the floor. One of the teenagers snagged it with a coil of fishing line and reeled it in.

Cutter pulled his second knife and advanced on the man in the tuxedo. Percy kept the others at bay. Cutter thrust at the assistants, who shrank back. A black walking stick appeared in the magician's hand, and he used it to parry Cutter's next thrust. Then he struck twice more, once at Cutter's temple and once at his wrist.

"Cutter!" Percy shouted.

Cutter spun around, but it was too late. One of the assistants brought a heavy metal wand down on his knife hand while the other pulled a burlap sack over his head. Together they took him to the floor. Despite his furious struggling, they managed to tie the neck of the bag closed and stuff him into a trunk.

Percy tried to come to Cutter's aid. He rushed the old man, who was the weakest link in the chain surrounding him. As Percy collided with him, the man vanished, his cloak falling to the floor, empty. Percy barreled forward, lost his balance, and sprawled on the floor.

The two teenagers climbed on top of him, pulling every restraint they could find from their pockets, the walls, and the display cases. When they were through, Percy was chained from head to toe, his hands and feet were tied with stiff twine, and he had thumbcuffs on all his fingers and several hundred dollars' worth of handcuffs along his arms and legs. Percy strained against the pounds of metal confining him, but got nowhere.

Ira picked up the cloak and reset the wire frame inside it that created the illusion of mass. Rubber feet anchored the hem, while a rubber mask created the old man's face. Quite an effective illusion, he thought.

"I hate magic," Percy said. One of the teenagers gagged him. The other tied a blindfold over his eyes and slapped a steel mask over that.

"You're in the wrong place then," Ira said. He turned to the other magicians to thank them.

Dan owed him, again.

The taxi let them out at the New York Penta, only a few blocks away from Tannen's. Dan paid the cabbie and followed Diana up to the eleventh floor.

"They don't know you're staying here?" he asked.

"Of course not," she said. She found her room key and unlocked the door to her suite.

"I want answers," Dan said.

"All right," Diana said, "but not out here. Wait till we get in." She opened the door. When they were both inside, she turned on the lights.

A man in a grey fedora was sitting in a chair facing the door. A cigarette smoked nearly to the filter jutted from one of his hands, a pistol from the other. He took a final drag on the cigarette and stubbed it out on the arm of the chair. His pistol was aimed dead center at Diana's chest.

"Now," he said, "you are going to give me the diamond."

"Get in line," Dan said.

The gun rotated until it pointed at the obvious bulge in Dan's pocket. "You have it."

"No, I'm just glad to see you."

"Dan," Diana said, "give him the diamond."

"What is this?" Dan asked. "Do you know him?"

"No, but he's got a gun."

"I can see that," Dan said.

"Don't argue with a gun. Just give him the diamond, *please*."

"That's right," the man said. "Give it to me. Please."

Dan eased the diamond out of his pocket and held it out. The man took it and walked carefully to the door, never lowering his aim. "That was simple, wasn't it? Now you're not going to call the cops, because you'd have to explain what you were doing with a stolen diamond in your possession. But I don't have to tell you that because we're all professionals, right? And you're not going to come after me because if you do I'll have to shoot you dead. But you already knew that, too. It's been a pleasure dealing with you." With that, he was gone.

Neither Dan nor Diana made a move for the door.

"Who are you?" Dan asked at last. "If you don't work for Christiansen, how did you know about the diamond?"

"Dan," Diana said, "there's something I should tell you."

"Why should I believe you, whatever you say? How do I know these thugs don't work for you? And if they don't, why did you make me give up the diamond?"

"Calm down. That's part of what I want to tell you."

"You'd better start talking, lady."

Diana sighed. "I made you give it up because it wasn't worth our lives. It's not even a real diamond. It's cubic zirconium."

"How do you know that?"

"I ought to know," Diana said. "I sent it to you."

"You did not send it to me. My sister sent it to me."

"That's right."

It took a moment for this to sink in. "Impossible," Dan said.

"It's me, Dan. In the flesh."

"It can't be," Dan said. "Evelyn's just . . ."

"Just what? Just a little girl? Dan, you haven't seen me in almost five years!"

"I don't buy it. Prove that you're my sister."

"I married Kyle Nuys a couple of months ago. Before that I was Evelyn Reed. You used to tease me when I was a kid by making doves appear in my bed. You had this card trick you used to do, where the back of the deck changed color and the faces went blank. I idolized you because you had moved to New York and become a detective, and I told everyone that I was going to become a criminal so that we could work together."

"You've got a wart you can't get rid of on your right foot, and once you tried burning it off with Mom's lighter. You couldn't walk for weeks. The doctor wanted Mom to take you to a psychiatrist. You wouldn't go—"

"All right, all right," Dan said. "Enough!" He examined his sister from head to toe and back again. "You've changed."

"That's puberty for you. One day you're in pigtails and overalls, and then, just like that, five years later, you're a grown woman."

"You're stunning," Dan said.

"Thank you, Dan. A compliment from you means a lot, though your reaction back in your office was clear enough."

"I didn't know," Dan sputtered, "I couldn't—"

"No, of course not. It's asking too much that you should recognize your own sister."

"You don't look quite the way I remember," Dan said.

"To be fair, I don't look at all the way you remember," Evelyn said. "For that matter, you don't look the way I remember, either. Why do you think I put on that act, vamping you, and all? I wasn't sure it was you."

"What do you mean?"

"You looked right, but I was just a kid when I saw you last. Between that and your door being smashed, I figured you might be a plant, one of Christiansen's men come to intercept my package. I thought so until Cutter showed up, at least, but even that could have been a setup. You understand, don't you? I couldn't take the chance of telling you who I was."

"When did you decide I was

really me?" Dan asked.

"When you took me to Tannen's. No one else would have done that. If I had any doubts left, they were gone when the salesman called you by name. That would have been too elaborate even for Christiansen to set up."

Slowly Dan was getting over the initial shock. This made room in his head for confusion. Evelyn back from Zaire, and married, and gorgeous . . . three men, each less pleasant than the last, not to mention the mysterious kingpin, Christiansen . . . fists, knives, guns, diamonds—it was all terribly disconcerting.

And all of it for a *phony* diamond? Dan hoped Evelyn could clear things up.

"Could you do me a favor," he said, "and tell me what's going on?"

"Certainly," Evelyn said. "Christiansen sent his men after you because he thought I had sent you a diamond I stole from him."

"And he was right," Dan said.

"No, he wasn't. What I sent you was pure cubic zirconium, the biggest piece I could find. It's not worthless, but it's hardly priceless."

"And you stole that?"

"No, I bought it nice and legal, sealed it in the tennis ball right in front of a postal officer, and paid the postage in cash. I

explained it was a gag gift for a friend in the States who would enjoy getting a 'smuggled diamond.' He went along with it."

"I'm surprised he did," Dan said.

"The bribe didn't hurt. Neither did a little flirting. Besides, he wasn't doing anything illegal; what harm could come of letting me mail my own CZ home any way I wanted to?"

"I suppose," Dan said. "But what good could come of it?"

"I'm surprised you haven't figured it out," Evelyn said. "You taught me the principle, after all. I'm just applying it."

"What principle is that?"

"Misdirection."

Dan grinned. Of course. "You weren't smuggling the CZ."

"No, I wasn't."

"You were smuggling the tennis ball."

"Give the man a prize."

"And why would you want to smuggle a tennis ball?"

"It wasn't an ordinary tennis ball," Evelyn said.

"I would hope not."

"Where is it now? I'll show you what's special about it."

"I threw it out," Dan said, "in my office."

Dan picked the two pieces of the tennis ball from his trash can. Evelyn took them from him and turned them inside out, so the rubber lining faced

out. Burned into the rubber was an irregular pattern of lines and squares. Evelyn held the two pieces so that the patterns intersected.

"It's a map," she said, "to Christiansen's private stash. In addition to every other illegal activity he's engaged in, he's skimming off the top of his own operation. A smart thief, armed with a detailed map, could clean him out. And a smart businesswoman could sell such a map for a tidy flat fee plus percentage, with this for proof that it's authentic." Evelyn reached into her jumpsuit and withdrew from a concealed pocket a stone that looked like the one Dan had given up, only considerably smaller.

"More CZ?"

"No. That's the real thing."

Dan took it from his sister. To his eye it looked no more or less authentic than the one Evelyn had revealed to be fake. "And how did you get this one out?"

"It was all misdirection," Evelyn said. "Christiansen thought I had already mailed the stone to you, so his people gave up looking for it on me." She took the diamond back and returned it to its resting place. "Getting it past customs was a little trickier. I cut the bottom off a bottle of Grand Marnier, put the diamond in, glued the

bottle shut, then declared the bottle. No one thought to check it since I was presenting it so openly, and if they had, they would have found the seal intact."

"How did you cut a glass bottle?" Dan asked. Then he realized. "The diamond, of course." She was good! It was hard to believe, but little Evie had made good on her vow to become a criminal mastermind. Dan was proud of her in the way only a brother can be.

Of course she was taking it a little too far. Being clever might net you a diamond, but it takes a lot more than cleverness for you to keep it, especially when it belongs to a man who smuggles diamonds for a living—and who employs enforcers like Percy and Cutter. There's only so long you can keep running.

"That man who took the CZ back at the hotel—who was he?" Dan asked.

As they spoke, Evelyn helped Dan right his desk. "I'm not sure. I didn't recognize him, but I'll bet he works for Christiansen."

"And that diamond you just showed me," Dan said, "you stole that from Christiansen?"

"You got it. Romanced him, robbed him, and ran. The three R's."

Dan was tempted to ask her

what Kyle thought of all this, but he decided not to. "Percy, Cutter, and this third man were all trying to get the diamond that's in your pocket?"

"Right."

"But you've still got it."

"Right."

"So won't they come back?"

"Not Percy and Cutter, if your friends took care of them," Evelyn said, "but Christian-sen's got plenty more where they came from."

"That's what I thought. You'll have to send the diamond back, then."

"I can't," Evelyn said. "Without it, no one will believe the map's genuine."

"I'm sorry," Dan said, "but if you don't, people will constantly be breaking my door down to get it. I can't have that." Besides, he added silently, it's for your own good.

"You could move," Evelyn said. "Get a new identity. Go underground."

Dan fixed his sister with a withering stare. "I don't want to go underground. I like it where I am."

"Come on, Dan! After everything I've gone through . . ."

Dan handed her a sheet of paper and a pen. "Dear Christiansen," he said. "I'm so sorry I took your diamond, but you know what jealousy can make a person do."

"Jealousy?"

"Can you ever forgive me? I'll never forget our time together.' So on and so forth, here's your diamond back, affectionately, Evelyn Nuys, or Diana Keeper, or whatever you called yourself." Dan ignored the fury in her eyes. "Got that? Now write it. And then I want to see it. I don't trust you."

Evelyn looked ready to kill. "I won't forget this."

Dan patted her on the head. "What are big brothers for?"

It was way past business hours when Dan returned to Tannen's. Ira was waiting when he got there.

Dan let Cutter out of his trunk first. Without his knives, Cutter wasn't much of a threat. Dan explained that there was a bit of a misunderstanding, and handed him a package containing the diamond and Evelyn's letter.

Cutter inhaled deeply, the stink of burlap still caught in his throat, and examined the package and its contents. Only when he seemed satisfied did Dan begin the complicated process of undoing Percy's shackles.

When Percy was finally free, he seemed set to erupt; but Dan apologized to him, and returned Cutter's knives, and this so surprised him that he forgot to

beat Dan and Ira to a pulp and demolish the store as he had vowed to himself that he would.

Ira called the elevator and ushered the two men out. For the first time since the whole affair began, Ira was alone with Dan. He wagged a finger in Dan's face. "We never talk any more."

Dan laughed. "I'll tell you everything. It's a crazy story. How soon can you leave?"

Ira looked at the mess on the floor. "Fifteen minutes. Ten if you help."

"Sure," Dan said. "We don't have to meet Evelyn until eleven. That should be plenty of time to fill you in."

Percy couldn't find a thing to watch. He was sitting in a chair across from the television; every few seconds he'd stand to change channels. In the end he settled on wrestling. It was the standard routine, but at least it was something he could appreciate.

Cutter, meanwhile, had opened his briefcase on one of the room's twin beds. Inside it were two machines and the two fake diamonds Dan had foisted on them. If this was another fake . . . Cutter didn't even want to think about it.

He took the package out of one of his smock's pockets and carefully unwrapped the dia-

mond. The machine on the left looked like a miniature tissue box with a pen-shaped probe attached to it. Cutter took the probe and touched it to the diamond. A green light lit up on the box.

Very good. The only way to tell a diamond apart from a hunk of cubic zirconium was to measure its thermal conductivity. This sample had just tested positive. Cutter returned the probe to its clip on the side of the box. The green light went off. He rewrapped the diamond and nestled it next to the probe.

Next, Cutter moved the telephone from the nightstand to the bed and lifted the cover of the second machine. Inside, the machine had a padded cradle into which the telephone receiver fit snugly. Cutter dialed an outside line, then the international code that would connect him with Zaire. While his call went through, he flipped a switch below the cradle labeled SCRAMBLE.

The call was picked up and after Cutter went through channels and delivered a half-dozen passwords, a powerful male voice issued from a loud-speaker. "This is scrambled?"

"Yes," Cutter said. "This is Cutter. Percy is with me. Newton will be with us soon. We have the diamond."

"You are certain?"

"Absolutely. The girl's brother gave it to us."

"Strange. And the girl?"

"She had him give us a note for you."

"Read it."

"Sir, are you sure?"

"Read it." Cutter unfolded Evelyn's note and read it aloud, stumbling only over its most intimate passages. When he was done, he folded it up and put it in his pocket. "Very good." The voice sounded pleased. "Bring it home."

Cutter disconnected the call and closed the scrambler. "Come on," he said to Percy. He took off his smock and knives, put them in the briefcase, and locked it. "Newton's checking out for us. Let's go." Percy gladly switched off the television.

Downstairs, they collected Newton, who was still wearing his grey fedora. An unlit cigarette clung to his lower lip. Cutter relayed his conversation with Christiansen to Newton, who shook his head.

"The boss must really be hung up on this girl," Newton said. "First he doesn't want us to kill her, then he doesn't want us to kill the brother either, now he gets a 'Dear John' letter and you say he sounded happy?"

"Forget it," Cutter said. "He got the diamond, and that's what matters."

The three men left the Plaza

Hotel walking towards Central Park. When they reached the park's southern edge, they tried to hail a taxi. The night was dark and noisy and full of cars, but there were no empty taxis. Cutter sent Newton out into the street to catch a cab the hard way, by standing in one's path.

From behind, Cutter felt a tap on his shoulder. "Don't make any noise," a cold voice said. "Don't call your friend. Give me your watches and your wallets."

Newton was in the street, out of reach; naturally, he was the only one with a weapon. Cutter cursed under his breath and turned around. This was New York City, not Zaire, specifically Central Park at night; he should have been more careful.

"I said, watches and wallets. Give them to me or I'll blow your heads off." Their assailant was a black man of medium build in a knit cap and a jogging suit. He was holding a small-caliber handgun. His eyes were full of fear and anger, and his finger was tight on the trigger.

Cutter chanced a look back as Percy turned around. Newton was still dodging cars, oblivious. Cutter slid his watch off his wrist and his wallet out of his pocket, and gave them to the mugger. Percy wore no watch, but he surrendered his wallet.

"You got any housekeys?"

Cutter spread his hands. "We're from out of the country."

"Fine. The briefcase."

"What?" Cutter said.

"Hand it over, man."

Cutter swung the briefcase desperately at the gun. The mugger fired, hitting Cutter in the right knee. Cutter collapsed. The gun shot caught Newton's attention and he ran to Cutter's side, but the mugger had already grabbed the briefcase and vanished into the park. At their feet, Cutter started to moan.

"Oh, God," Percy said. "How are you going to explain this to the boss?"

Newton looked at Percy, then down at Cutter, then back.

"Well?" Percy asked.

"Shut up, Wheems."

Dan and Ira met Evelyn outside the Cometeria nightclub. Dan had expected her to be angry with him still, but instead she was in a good mood. She told them that Kyle would be coming by later, and that they were all to go in ahead.

The man at the door stopped them. "You two are fine," he told the men, "but I need an I.D. for her."

Evelyn was offended, and Dan could see why. In heels and a strapless dress she hardly looked

under age. "You can let her in," Dan said.

"Sure I can," the man said, "but I won't unless you show me proof that she's twenty-one."

"I'll show you proof that she's a hundred." A bill appeared at Dan's fingertips.

The man took it and examined it. "Her name's Benjamin Franklin?"

"That's right," Dan said.

"Pass." The man pocketed the bill.

"Dan," Evelyn said once they had found a table, "you didn't have to do that."

"You have to know how to deal with these people," Dan said. "You've got to speak their language. Besides, it's fake."

"Counterfeit?" Evelyn asked.

"Fake," Dan said.

Evelyn laughed. "There's hope for you yet."

Four rounds of drinks later, a black man in his late twenties approached the table. He was wearing a leather jacket with a sport shirt and black denim pants. Evelyn stood up and took his hand.

"Dan, Ira," she said, "I want you to meet my husband, Kyle."

"Your husband?" Dan asked.

"Sorry I'm late," Kyle said. He kissed Evelyn, took a seat, and ordered a Gibson martini. "I had some work to finish and then I had to change. So, what did I miss?"

"A gallon of booze." Ira indicated the empty glasses.

"Evelyn was telling us about the tournament," Dan said.

"Oh, yes," Kyle said. His eyes sparkled in the club's half-light. "I turned her on to that, actually. We're both big tennis fans, and my family's from Zaire originally, so I thought it would make an interesting honeymoon."

"Did you enjoy it?" Dan asked.

"I wouldn't go back, if that's what you mean. Some parts of the country are absolutely wretched, and the way the miners live is horrible. The tennis was good, though. And really, we didn't get out much."

"Dan just wants to know about the sex," Evelyn said. "He's like you." Kyle laughed and Dan made a throttling motion in her direction.

Shortly after midnight, the crowd started to thin and the conversation to dwindle. Evelyn and Kyle decided to call it

a night. Before they left, Dan took Evelyn aside.

"About that map," he said. "You're not going to go back yourself, are you?"

"If I can't sell it to anyone else, I will."

"But Christiansen knows you! He'll recognize you!"

"You should have thought of that before you made me give the diamond back." Evelyn tousled Dan's hair. "Don't worry. I'll take care of myself."

"Don't worry, she says. I'm going back to a fortress in Zaire to steal some diamonds, but don't worry." Dan hugged his sister tight. "I'll try."

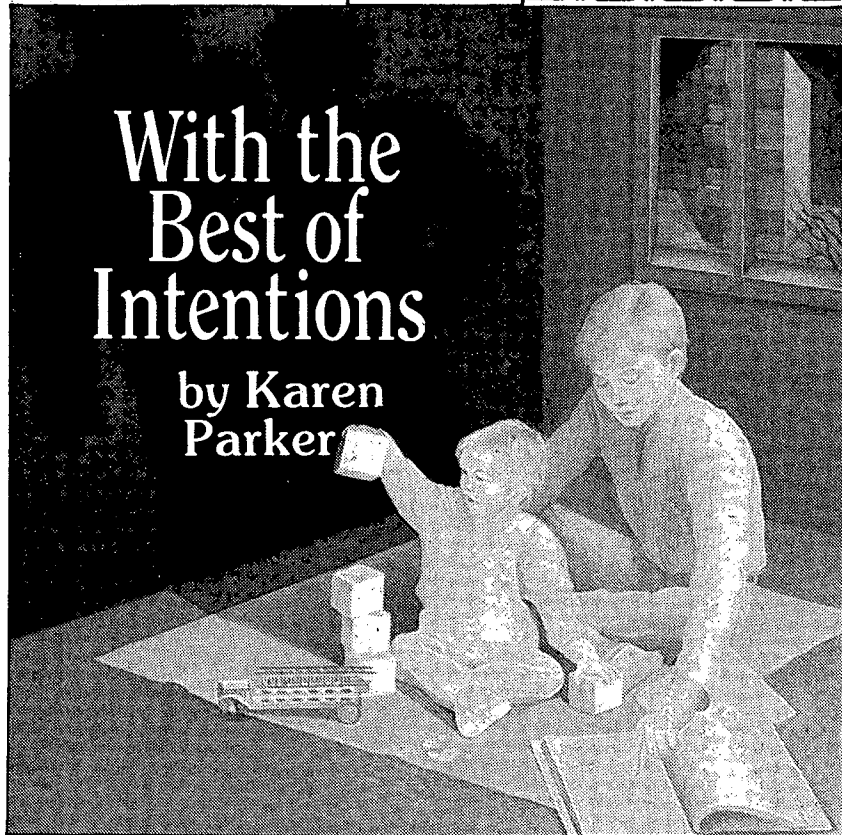
Then Dan took Kyle aside. He had to. He put his hands on Kyle's shoulders and looked him straight in the eye. "You got the diamond back, didn't you?"

"Yes," Kyle said.

They chose each other well, Dan decided. He hugged Kyle as he had hugged Evelyn. "Welcome to the family."

With the Best of Intentions

by Karen Parker



“Matthew” — plop . . . “Persis” — plop . . . “Thornton” — plop . . . “Matthew” — plop . . . The narrow area between apartment buildings was shaded and cool, blocked at one end by fancy brickwork, at the other end by a high board fence and cover shrubbery. “Persis” — plop . . . Matthew sat with his back against the rough

brick of his building, feet flat against the brick of the one next door. He dropped pieces of dirt down a narrow pipe which was sticking out of the ground. There was water at the bottom of the pipe. “Thornton” — plop . . . No one else knew about the loose board on the fence or his possession of the small space. It was his own secret.

From a window above his

Illustration by Mark Fresh

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head an angered voice stopped his hand in mid-reach for another lump of earth and his body stiffened.

"I've told you before. I've told you . . ." A hard slap and a resulting wail. "I told you not to do it." Another slap. "Stop that crying." Slap. "Stop it. Right now." Slap. Slap. "Okay now. You stay here until I tell you to move. Don't get off that chair."

A door slammed and Matthew drew air into lungs that had stopped working as he listened. Muffled crying from above sent a cold wave of hatred and fury through his body. Picking up a piece of earth he crushed it savagely and then brushed away tears that had come into his own eyes. Dirt-stained hands left marks on his cheeks.

Twice before, when in his special place, he had heard her scream at him. But she had never hit him before. At least Matthew had never heard her.

"She's a double-damned child beater," he whispered fiercely and pushed his head hard against his knees. It felt good to swear. It felt good to describe her out loud. He'd heard the term "child beater" on television. The "double-damned" he'd heard his father say.

He'd told his mother the last time. "Mrs. Wilson yells at Timmy and makes him cry."

"That's too bad." His mother

had been leafing through a cookbook with an occasional glance at the clock. "But he must have been doing something wrong. Will you eat Brussels sprouts if I put them in a casserole?"

"She hates him."

"Hmmm? No, she doesn't. Will you?"

"No." He had gone out, frustrated, slamming the door.

Slowly he untensed his body as the sound of quiet crying changed to sniffs and jerky breathing. Matthew stared hard at a line of bricks. He was thinking.

As he crawled out through the space made by the pushed-back loose board and hid in the shrubbery until he was certain no one would see him leave, the newborn plan in his mind grew and took form. And as he ran home, he began to add details.

The next morning he made one trip to the new houses that were being built at the end of the block. Four were nearly completed, but work had halted for some reason. Matthew had heard his parents say the workmen would not be back for a week or more. His mother thanked God for the silence.

At the end house he checked the basement window that faced the woods. It was still unlocked. With the surrounding trees and heaped hard earth he was in no danger of being seen as he

pushed open the window and gently threw a blanket, four cans, and two plastic bags onto the gravel floor of the basement.

Back in his own part of the block he walked past the row of apartments, and at the end of the street he circled around and approached the Wilson building from the rear, through the woods. Timmy was sitting in the back yard pulling up grass.

Matthew casually unhooked the back gate and beckoned to Timmy, who scampered eagerly toward him on chubby legs. "Let's go for a walk," he said and put out his hand. "Okay. Walk." The child smiled.

Matthew led him along the wire fence toward the woods. His hands and feet felt sweaty, but if anyone called out, he would say they were just going for a walk. But then his plan would not work.

In the shelter of the trees he turned and looked back. No one was in sight. He smiled to himself.

Matthew tried to hurry through the woods but the two-year-old kept tripping over branches and rocks. Finally he picked him up and was surprised. Timmy smelled just like Mrs. Metcalfe's new baby.

"Nasty mommy won't hurt you any more. Mommy's bad," he told the child as he walked. Timmy frowned and raised a fat

hand to his cheek. Matthew set him down for a moment so he could breathe and rest, and he touched the cheek gently. It looked bruised. Timmy winced.

"I won't hurt you. I'm good," Matthew said as he picked up the child again.

When they reached the new house, Matthew set his baby down and breathed deeply. For a small kid he was awfully heavy to carry.

"You stay here, Timmy. Sit down and wait. Eat this. I'll be right back." He dug a broken, slightly sandy cookie out of his pocket. Timmy took it and shoved it into his mouth, watching with large eyes as Matthew lowered himself backwards through the basement window. By stretching his arms Matthew shortened the distance between his feet and the floor and then pushed backward as he jumped so he wouldn't land on the bags and cans.

Licking a scraped wrist and limping slightly from a jarred foot, he went up the stairs and opened the back door. It had a push lock on the handle. Timmy shouted gleefully at the appearance trick he thought Matthew had performed.

Matthew boosted Timmy onto the as yet stairless porch and climbed up after him. In the house he collected the bags and blanket and cans and led the

toddler to a small, sunny room at the back of the house.

Dumping the supplies on the floor, he set the blanket down neatly against one wall.

"There, see our nice house. These are for you." From one of the plastic bags he took two well-worn children's books, an old set of blocks, a broken fire truck, a catalogue, and a hard chunk of plasticine. They had come from his old toy chest. Timmy began to investigate.

"Here's some more cookies. And some peanut butter sandwiches. And juice..." he squeezed his eyes shut. "Darn it, I forgot the can opener."

Leaving his baby engrossed in the fire truck, he closed the hall door so Timmy couldn't wander into the front of the house, left the back door unlocked, and ran home.

In his kitchen he paused, but the apartment was silent. He scrambled through the silverware drawer and found a hook can opener. As he stuffed it in his pocket his mother came in.

"There you are. Timmy's missing and Mrs. Wilson's frantic. Have you been in the woods? They think he might have gone there." She took a pie, the crust just starting to scorch, out of the oven.

"No." He stared at the linoleum.

"That poor woman. She didn't think he knew how to open the

gate. And the highway's just a ways through the woods. The cars go so fast, he could easily..." She stopped, aware of her son. Matthew was so very sensitive. Violence on TV, sometimes even news events, gave him nightmares.

"Well, he'll be found safe and sound," she said briskly. "If you see him, let me know. Where are you going?"

"Just out. Playing." He was near the door.

"Be careful. I'll be at Mrs. Wilson's. I just wanted to take the pie..."

I hope she's really worried, he thought. I hope worrying bruises her.

Timmy was sucking a chocolate cookie and playing with the blocks. "Biffle," he said proudly, pointing at the wooden cubes.

"Yeah, neat," Matthew replied. He had no idea what a biffle was. "Here, drink some. It's juice." Timmy regarded the tin can with its two holes. "See, like this." Matthew showed him. Timmy spilled liquid down his face and arms when he drank and choked once but smiled when he had had enough. "Now let's look at the books. There's some pretty good stories."

At the noon hour Matthew ran home but his mother was not there. A plate of sandwiches was wrapped in a plastic bag on the table, and a glass of milk

was in the fridge. He drank the milk, put the sandwiches in a bag, and poured some more milk into an empty olive jar he found in the cupboard.

Timmy, in spite of a number of cookies and half a peanut butter sandwich, was hungry and drank down all the milk. Matthew tried to rub some of the food off his baby's face and arms, but it was sticky. He decided to bring a washcloth back after supper. And maybe a pair of his jeans. Timmy left a wet spot on the floor wherever he sat.

"I'll bring back my sleeping bag after I'm supposed to be asleep. And another blanket. You be good and don't cry or anything. In a few days your mommy will miss you so much. Then I'll send her a nominous note, and if she agrees not to hurt you any more, I'll take you back. But don't you tell her who took you."

Timmy imitated Matthew's negative nod.

After eating they began to look through the catalogue. Footsteps and voices sounded outside, and Matthew froze. Someone climbed onto the back porch and tried the door. Matthew squeezed his eyes shut.

"Hey, it's open. Timmy?"

Just as Matthew turned toward the child to warn him to be quiet, Timmy recognized the

voice. "Daddy," he called out happily.

Mr. Wilson burst into the room, followed by two other men. He swept the child from the floor and hugged him tightly. Looking at Matthew and the contents of the room, realization slowly entered his eyes. His mouth dropped open.

After seeing the horrified look on Mr. Wilson's face, Matthew's mind refused to function and he withdrew into himself.

Some time later he was in his own living room. His mother sat on the couch with her fingers pulling at each other; his father stood by the window; a policeman was sitting on the edge of the orange chair. Matthew was slowly coming out.

"Maybe we should call a doctor." His mother's voice was funny. "He isn't a stubborn child. He could be in shock."

Matthew raised his eyes from the toes of the policeman's heavy shoes and looked directly at all three people. They stared back at him.

"Won't you tell us why you did it, Matt?" His father spoke gently, seeing the hurt in his son's eyes. But his gaze was no longer empty at least, Mr. Thornton thought.

"I wanted," Matthew began, but then stopped. They wouldn't understand. They wouldn't believe him. He felt the futility of

being eight years old in an adult world. He swallowed. His mouth was dry. "I wanted to play with him."

The policeman shot a glance at his father, who frowned, looked quickly at his wife, then back at the policeman. "No," his father said.

It wasn't the right answer he had given, Matthew knew. It just upset them, for some reason. They had all tensed even more. His brain began to function, and he remembered something he had once said that had been a good, right thing to say. His father and mother had looked at each other then, too, but not like this, not like now.

"I wanted a baby brother," he said simply. It was the right thing to say. The lines in the policeman's forehead disappeared, and his mother moved suddenly and hugged him. His father relaxed with a sigh. "Oh, darling, my poor baby," his mother breathed into his hair. She looked up at the policeman. "I can't have—it isn't—we . . ."

He nodded and stood up. "I understand."

Matthew lay on top of his bed and stared at the map of Africa crack on the ceiling. The policeman had gone; his parents had talked to him softly. And he'd promised not to do it again. They were sitting in the living room talking about adopting a

baby. Matthew had listened, and the idea of a brother pleased him. But he had more important things to think of and had gone silently to his room.

He thought of the bruise on Timmy's cheek. The sound of the slaps. He knew why Mrs. Wilson got so angry. He'd seen her, twice now, carry a paper bag from her house, through the woods, and throw it along the highway. He'd investigated the contents.

Pretending it had happened on TV, he'd asked his father, who had explained. And said yes, those people were often angry and sometimes didn't know what they were doing.

"Mrs. Wilson is a problem drinker," he said aloud. It felt good to say it. Matthew slid off the bed and looked out the window towards the Wilsons' building. The car was gone from the Wilsons' space. Mr. Wilson must have gone back to the office. He worked late lots of times.

Matthew couldn't breathe properly. His chest felt so tight. He wanted, for some reason, to see Timmy. He wanted, somehow, to make sure he was all right. He wanted to tell Mrs. Wilson not to, not to—he didn't know what. But he went into the living room.

"Why, that's a very thoughtful idea, Matthew." His mother glanced proudly at his father.

"I'm sure Mrs. Wilson will appreciate it."

He sat with downcast eyes in the Wilson living room and said his prepared apology. Mrs. Wilson played nervously with her rings. Her eyes were red. She pushed her feet in and out of the high-heeled slippers with purple bunny tails on the front that he had giggled at when his mother told him they were called mules.

"Thank you, Matthew, for coming and telling me. Your mother explained, uh, why. You can play with Timmy whenever you want. He's—sleeping now."

"That's okay. I'll see him tomorrow." He stood up. "Could I use your bathroom. I feel kinda sick."

"Sure, go ahead."

She motioned him toward it and turned herself toward the cupboard with the bottles.

Matthew ran the water and looked at his face in the mirror. Then he pulled himself up on the sink and put his mouth under the tap to get a drink. He kept trying to swallow something that seemed stuck in his chest.

"Play?" asked Timmy when Matthew came out.

Mrs. Wilson was still by the cupboard. "He woke up," she said. "I hoped he'd sleep longer."

"Can I take him out in the back yard?" Matthew asked.

She hesitated, ran her tongue over her lips. "Why, sure. But—uh, don't go away."

"I won't."

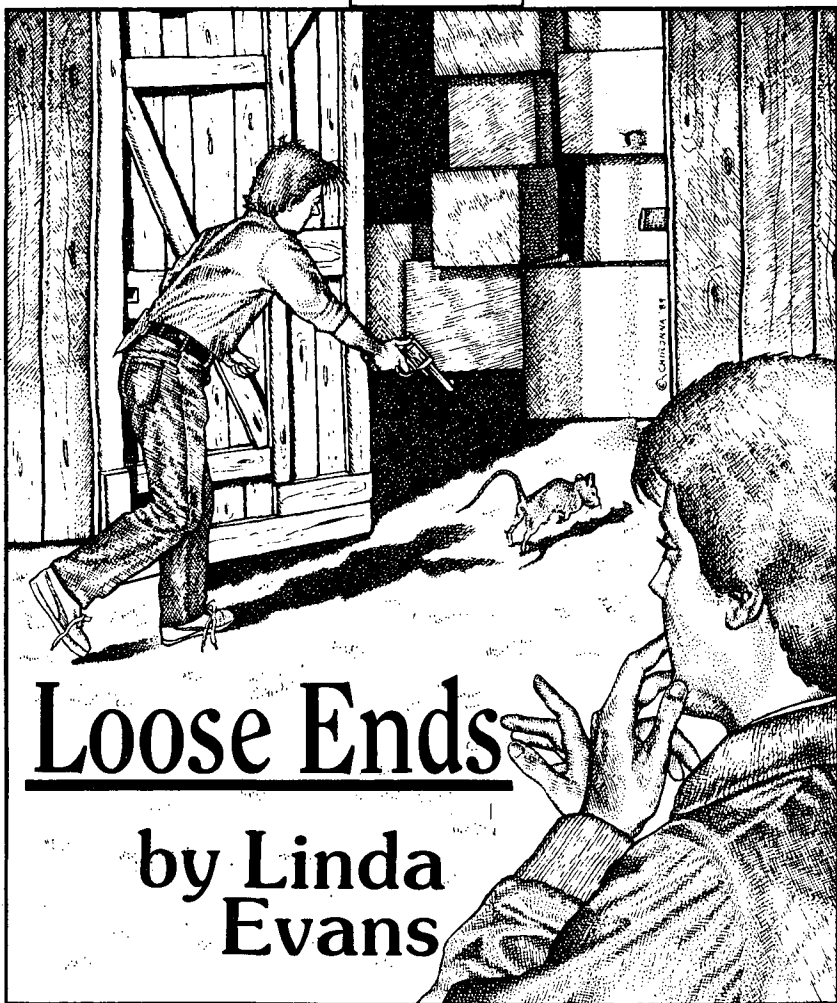
"Watch the stairs, they're steep," she called out as Matthew opened the door to the back hall. She said the same thing each and every time someone went out that way.

Timmy sat on the top step and started down on his bum, one step at a time. Matthew sat down as well and imitated Timmy's descent. But once past the first step he reached back and pulled the landing mat so that it hung part way over the top stair. He didn't look back.

When they got downstairs and Timmy was in the pile of sand by the fence, Matthew walked slowly back to the open door, to the bottom of the steps. All he had to do was yell. He knew what would be likely to happen if he yelled for Mrs. Wilson to hurry and come quick. He knew she'd come running. In her purple high-heeled mules. To the top of the steep steps. Running funny. Where the mat was hanging loose.

Matthew opened his mouth to call out. But he didn't shout. And in the instant of his silence the huge black dog next door stuck his head over the fence by the sand pile, barked in Timmy's face, and Timmy began to scream.

FICTION



I pushed my way into the convenience store and wrinkled my nose when the odor of “buy here, die here” burritos and “you heat it, you eat it” microwave pizza hit me in the face. David edged up beside me,

his shoulder brushing against my arm, the way he always does when we’re in a public place. I gave him a reassuring wink and tossed a newspaper and a pack of gum onto the counter.

The cashier dropped her battered copy of *True Romance* into her lap. She rang up the sale, pretending not to notice my brother's intense, uncomprehending gaze, and said the usual "have a good day" without including David. We'd been here before.

As we started back across the parking lot, somebody clapped me on the back, nearly knocking me over. I staggered, dodging an oily puddle, before I managed to get turned around.

"Mike. Mike Grant. It's been a long time."

Not nearly long enough, I thought, ignoring the hand Frank Olsen stuck out at me. Trying to stall while I thought up a good excuse to give him the brushoff, I handed David his gum and mumbled, "Hello, Frank."

Frank looked me up and down like I was a used car on its last miles. "You haven't changed."

I supposed I was still more or less the same as when he saw me last—undersized, blond, fairly mild-mannered—but I couldn't say the same of him. Frank had about doubled in bulk and he seemed taller and even more full of self-confidence than I remembered.

"You living here now?" he asked, rocking back on his heels and patting imaginary dust off of his coat.

I hesitated, watching as David poured the multicolored chunks of gum onto his hand and then, picking up the pieces one by one, sniffed at them delicately. I knew he was only trying to determine which flavor was which, but I wished he wouldn't. Not here in front of Frank.

"Yes, I live here now," I said. "When I ran off, I stayed with Uncle Martin till he died and then I moved here for a job." I turned away and put my hand on David's arm, hoping Frank would take the hint that I wasn't overjoyed to see him and stop playing twenty questions.

"You haven't been back home at all?"

I shrugged. "You know how it is. Then mother died a few months ago, and when I showed up for the funeral, I found out I inherited a pile of bills and David."

Frank's eyes, dark marbles pasted into place between the fat rolls of his face, stared at my brother as though David had been invisible up to now and had suddenly materialized before his eyes. "You got the retard?"

I felt all the muscles in my neck and shoulders tense up, and I said evenly, "My brother's not retarded."

"Sure." Frank waved a fleshy hand at me, dismissing the subject, and fished a business card

out of his coat pocket. "I expect you're looking for some extra money. I need to hire someone, and as soon as I spotted you, Mike, I knew you were perfect for the job."

He pushed the card at me and I took it. Black embossed letters on white. FRANK OLSEN ENTERPRISES. Two phone numbers and an address in the expensive section of town.

"What makes you think I need a job?" I asked, resenting the implication.

Frank laughed, his doughy features crinkling into a lumpy mass, as he bulldozed forward into my space. "Aw, come on, Mike. Don't take everything so personal. Everybody could use a little extra and the pay is tops. Guaranteed."

"What would I have to do?" I eased back a step and wiped my damp palms on my pants legs. David watched me solemnly, his jaws working on the gum, and I wished I knew what he was thinking.

The card hadn't told me much. In my experience, "enterprises" was a euphemism for "any old way to make a fast buck as long as I can get away with it." But that figured. In our boyhood days, Frank was the inventor of contraptions such as home-made race cars and cardboard rocket ships which I, as the smaller and probably dumber

of the two, had to test pilot.

"Come see me and we'll talk about it."

He suddenly strode off, seeming to take my cooperation for granted, and I shoved the card into my wallet. I tucked the newspaper under one arm and signaled David to follow.

I didn't know whether I'd take Frank up on his offer or not. Besides not liking Frank, the main thing is, I don't care for his attitude toward David. My brother is not retarded, but I've never been able to convince Frank.

As though the years hadn't passed, I was suddenly back in Centerville, a skinny, fatherless kid wearing oversized Goodwill shorts and T-shirt. David, four years younger and a smaller version of myself, trotted behind me with his cornsilk hair flying back in the wind.

Then Frank appeared out of nowhere blocking the sidewalk with his bulk and his personality.

"It's Mikey and the ree-tard. Mikey and the ree-tard."

David slipped up and clutched my hand. A tear spilled out of the corner of one eye and slid down his cheek, making a shiny trail through the grime that always coated his face after a day of playing outdoors.

"My brother's not retarded,

Frank. He just can't talk or understand what's said to him."

"Can't read or write either. Sounds retarded to me." He laughed, a harsh sound like the bark of my grandmother's ancient beagle.

After that I'd either fight him and get only mildly beat up, since he held back knowing he needed me around to torment, or I'd run. David always tried to help me fight, his little fists pounding furious and silent blows all over Frank's body, while Frank ignored him as he busied himself remodeling my arms and legs. On days when I felt lonely enough to stick around, I'd swallow my pride and ignore Frank's jibes so I could be his flunky and fall guy. It was a "heads Frank wins, tails I lose" situation all the way for me.

Now I fitted the key into the lock of the mini-apartment I shared with my brother. I deliberately avoided looking at the peeling paint on the door and the network of cracks on the wall.

"We'll forget about Frank," I said impulsively as we stepped inside. "He never meant anything to me except trouble." I talk to my brother a lot even though he can't understand.

David smiled sweetly and picked up his notebook. He was asking me to explain.

The only way to communicate with him is through pictures. Funny, no one ever thought of that until a few months ago when I hit on the idea myself. Maybe it's because I'm a photographer and an artist that I think in pictures. I mean, I'm not a professional artist, but I can draw.

Anyway, after my mother's funeral when I found out I had custody of David, I went to see him at the so-called training center where she'd dumped him. The poor kid was so doped up with tranquilizers he could barely walk, but he recognized me right off. I could tell by the way he wrapped his arms around my neck, refusing to let go, until the orderlies had to pry him loose.

I always knew there was nothing wrong with his intelligence—probably the only one who did since as kids we spent so much time together. I had to make it up to him that I'd left town to get away from the gorilla my mother was living with at the time and didn't take him with me.

Against my lawyer's advice, I brought him home and tried not to think of the future. When the drugs finally wore off, he surprised me one day by pointing to a picture of a McDonald's in a magazine. I put two and two together and took him out

for a Big Mac. After that we spent an afternoon cutting pictures out of books and magazines and pasting them into a notebook. Now when David wants anything, he shows me a picture.

I grabbed a piece of paper and made a quick sketch of Frank. Next I showed David a picture of a jackass in his book. He laughed and nodded vigorously and I knew he'd gotten the message.

Well, bills being what they are, and my pay as a studio photographer being damned little, I took back my promise to myself to leave Frank Olsen strictly alone. A week after our parking-lot meeting, David and I walked into Frank's black and white office. Whoever had done the decorating had analyzed Frank to perfection with that color scheme.

"Curiosity got the best of you finally?" He pumped my hand, squeezing my fingers till they turned purple, and invited me to take a seat.

"No. Poverty, actually."

I shook some blood back toward my fingers and perched on the edge of a black leather armchair next to a real, not plastic, plant—the only spot of color in the room. David remained standing in front of Frank. Frank frowned, then reached

out uncertainly and patted my brother on the head. "Good boy. Sit."

"For God's sake, Frank, he isn't a dog," I snapped.

"Well, make him sit or send him out to play or something."

I tapped David on the arm and signaled him to take a seat beside me. "He doesn't go out to play. He's eighteen years old."

"Whatever." Frank narrowed his too small eyes and then tried to smile. As he dropped heavily into his chair, his coat slid back and I caught a glimpse of a shoulder holster under his left armpit. I felt my eyebrows arch, but following Frank's lead, I didn't comment.

Frank took about five minutes to outline the job.

"I'll take it," I said, without deliberating. "Mom's bills." I made a cutting motion across my throat.

Frank chuckled and leaned forward. "You know the trouble with you, Mike? You're too soft. Take me for instance. I work alone, I take care of details and I *always* tie up loose ends. I think of every angle. Result—I'm rich and successful. Now take you."

Well, if I ever needed to get Frank a gift, an arm extender so he could pat himself on the back ought to be ideal. I held up a hand. "No, thanks. I'm not

in the mood for a lecture on my shortcomings."

"You're too soft," Frank said, as though he hadn't heard me. "You take on your mother's debts and a retarded brother. That kind of trouble you don't need."

I left in the middle of Frank's speech, pulling David after me. No point in trying to convince someone who saw the world in black and white that there's a difference between brain-damage and retardation. Besides, even if my brother *were* retarded, I'd still look after him, so Frank's comments really didn't make any difference.

"I must be crazy or something," I said to David a few days later as we carried the last of our things into the cabin. "Frank thinks you're retarded and I've just proved I'm crazy, so I guess we make a prize pair."

I had to be off my beam to end up living out here on a deserted ranch in a tumbledown shack miles from nowhere just on Frank's sayso. But then poverty does strange things to people.

When Frank offered me double what I was making, plus a free place to stay and he threw out a hint about bonuses, I couldn't resist. This might be

the only chance I'd ever have.

All I had to do was live here and keep an eye on the place Frank had leased. Frank said sometimes campers and hunters trespassed and he didn't want them stealing the machine parts he'd stored in the barn.

Okay, I'm not stupid. And I know Frank. I figured he was into something shady. Hell, I *knew* he was into something, especially after he made a major production out of telling me to stay away from the barn and don't let my retarded brother play out there. But I figured it was something like industrial espionage and as long as I minded my own business and played the dumb caretaker role, I'd be fine.

I parked my old Chevy wagon next to the cabin, and David and I spent a week cleaning the place, which should give you some kind of idea of the advanced state of filth it had sunk to: there were only two rooms—a bedroom and a kitchen/living area. I did not mention a bathroom. That's because the facilities consisted of a ramshackle set of boards in roughly the shape of an outhouse about a hundred yards or so behind the cabin. At least we had electricity.

Frank honored us with a visit right after we made the place

semi-fit for human habitation.

"Not bad," he said, standing in the middle of the living room and swiveling his head from one side to the other. "You should be comfortable."

"Yeah, if we love rats."

"So, get a cat." Frank settled his bulk down on the couch, on the end that didn't sag.

David handed Frank a glass of iced tea and Frank eyed him like he thought the tea was really dishwater. In return, David nailed him with the full intensity of his gaze until Frank gave up and looked away.

"Go ahead," I said, leaning back in my chair and hoping Frank didn't see the beginnings of a smile pulling at my mouth. "I promise you it's safe."

Frank grunted and took a sip. "Look, the reason I'm here is I have to pick up the merchandise from the barn. Then in a few days I'll bring more. Meanwhile, I got to thinking."

He paused and I didn't move, though I winced inside. Going by past experience, whenever Frank had any ideas, they usually had major negative effects on my life.

"It's best if you don't go anywhere or let anyone know you're here. I can bring anything you need."

"Wait a minute. Who's going to rob you if we're only gone for a few hours?"

"You let *me* worry about that."

Frank sounded exactly the way he had the day he'd convinced me to swipe a pack of Marlboros from Safeway and then ran off when the manager grabbed me.

"I'm all grown up now, Frank.

What about letting me do my own worrying?"

"No!" Frank leaped to his feet and his face reddened up about three shades. "I'm paying you to stay here and if you can't follow orders, you can go back to being a two bit photographer."

I opened my mouth to tell him that was exactly what I'd do, but the stack of unpaid bills on the table waved at me in the breeze from an open window. Meekly I shut my mouth.

"Okay, Frank," I said. "We'll stay put, but you have to keep us supplied with plenty of food. And what about books and magazines? I get bored staring at the knotholes in the wall."

"Sure, sure." He was all smiles again. "No one knows you're here, right?"

"Right." My ex-boss and the few people I'd met at work hadn't seemed especially interested in my future when I quit. I hadn't lived in town long enough to get to know anyone else, so except for my brother, I was alone in the world.

"Keep it that way," Frank said, sitting back down.

He finished his iced tea and

rubbed at the side of his face, his fingers searching out the coarse hairs poking through a mole on his cheek and gently pulling at them. When David bent over to pick up Frank's empty glass, Frank reached out absently and patted him on the head.

I saw the gleam in my brother's eyes so I wasn't surprised when he turned and licked Frank's hand.

Frank jerked back and whipped out a handkerchief. "Can't you keep the retard under control?"

I sighed. "He's not retarded. And he doesn't like you patting him on the head like he's a dog or something."

Frank didn't answer. He was too busy scrubbing the top five or six layers of skin off the back of his hand with the handkerchief. When I helped him load the boxes from the barn into his truck, David stayed in the house.

The boxes didn't feel the way I thought boxes of machine parts should feel. The weight or the bulkiness or something was wrong. I toyed with the idea of having a peek, but didn't. Frank had made it clear he wanted his business dealings kept a secret and I was determined he wouldn't get the best of me for once.

Frank was back a week later

with a fresh supply of merchandise. In addition to another twenty or so cartons for the barn, he brought enough groceries for Napoleon's army, a bagful of used paperbacks and magazines, and a radio and TV.

"But no cat," I said to David when Frank had left again. Rats the size of poodles lived in the underbrush surrounding the house and barn, and since David and I had cleared a good bit of the mess, they'd begun invading the house. It was getting hard to sleep with the sound of rats overhead, thundering across the tin roof.

I pointed out a rat in David's book and then a cat. He shook his head and took the book from me and flipped to a picture of a gun. Then he looked at me expectantly and I finally nodded.

"Okay. It may be overkill, but we have to do something."

I rummaged around in the closet until I found the old .32 Uncle Martin had left me and a couple of boxes of ammunition. The next time my brother and I worked outside we took the gun with us.

The rats were fast and hard to hit even at close range and I'm not the world's greatest marksman. David kept reaching for the gun and finally I showed him how to load it and shoot. In a few days he was bet-

ter than I was, so I let him take on the rat killing chore for himself.

Next time Frank showed up, I asked him to bring me a fresh supply of ammunition.

"What for? Someone been prowling around?" Instantly he shifted into the picture of alertness, his glance darting back and forth like he expected to spot a prowler lurking behind the refrigerator.

"Take it easy," I said, "It's for the rats. Unless you want to bring us a few good cats. You can pick up a whole box of them at the pound pretty cheap."

Frank didn't answer. I noticed him keeping his distance from David like he thought whatever it was that was wrong with my brother was catching. I wished Frank would wise up. But then the way David had been acting around Frank, I couldn't expect miracles.

Whenever he saw Frank, David went into a routine where he drooled all over his shirt and panted like a St. Bernard on a summer day. I kept signaling him to cut it out, and when Frank left, I showed my brother a clown picture. That didn't even slow him down and I suppose I couldn't blame him for wanting to tease Frank a little.

Frank didn't bring the cats, but he did bring the ammuni-

tion. The rodent population thinned so much that David took to hunting them down, stalking them like a big game hunter. The rats hardly stood a chance. David could move like an Indian, so quiet that sometimes he startled me into jumping even when I knew he was around.

Living on the ranch had given new meaning to the phrase "cabin fever." The only thing that kept me there was the steadily growing pile of cash in the strongbox under the bed. I'd had Frank pick up some money orders for me the first month and I'd paid off the rest of the debts. Now all I had to do was hang in until I saved up enough for a new start.

Frank had said to stay put and we did. "He didn't say anything about wandering around the ranch, though," I said.

David grinned and followed me down a trail. It took us about a week to explore the place. We found a lake, not big, but seemingly bottomless, and an abandoned quarry shaft not far from the house. A few bleached out skulls were all that were left of the cattle that once roamed the pastures.

A couple of days before Frank was due again I strolled out into the yard and leaned against a

post, part of what used to be a corral. Idly I watched my brother inch his slim frame along the side of the barn and then dart inside through the main door, which wouldn't close all the way.

As far as I knew, he'd stayed away from the barn since I'd indicated to him in the beginning that it was off limits. But the barn was about the only good place left to hunt rats.

I heard a shot and wandered over to take a look. I stopped short in the doorway.

What was left of a rat lay in front of an old stall. But the bloody spot didn't hold my attention. What interested me was the pile of white powder on the floor at the foot of the stack of boxes.

One of the boxes at the top of the stack had broken open, probably gnawed by a rat. The white powdery substance had leaked from a plastic bag and drifted down onto the other boxes and from there to the floor.

"So that's it," I said. "Drugs." I realized that I'd known all along, I just hadn't wanted to think about it.

I knelt and ran a finger through a drifted up pile of powder. On television the hero always tastes the white powder and then growls something like, "It's heroin, all right." But I

didn't know what heroin was supposed to taste like, so I left out that part.

I concentrated on cleaning the mess up and repairing the damage to the carton, hoping Frank wouldn't find out it'd been tampered with. I ended up transferring what was left of the white powder to another bag I found in the house and taping the carton shut.

I figured when we loaded the boxes, I'd grab the repaired one and put it in the bottom of the truck. With luck, Frank would never notice. After that, we'd be out of here fast. Maybe I'd been watching too many movies about drug wars, but drugs was one thing I refused to involve myself with.

"We could leave right now," I said at suppertime.

David picked up a chicken drumstick and nibbled at it. Then he tapped the notebook next to his plate.

I didn't know how to explain in pictures about the situation I'd gotten us into and I shook my head. All my instincts told me to leave now while I was still healthy. But tomorrow Frank was due to hand over another sizable chunk of cash—enough to make waiting worth while.

David's pretty perceptive about picking up on feelings from tone of voice and body lan-

guage, since words mean nothing to him. After supper he patted me on the shoulder and signaled me to go into the living room. Then he cleaned the kitchen himself, a chore we usually shared.

I knew he understood I was troubled and wanted to spare me a little work, but I would have been better off with something to keep me busy. As it was, I spent the rest of the evening sprawled on the couch mentally kicking myself in the tail for ever going near Frank Olsen again.

Frank showed up right on schedule. My hands shook as I picked up the money he tossed onto the table and I broke into a sweat before we even started loading the boxes.

I don't think he noticed. Frank peered at his watch so many times, I was afraid he'd bump into the wall from not seeing where he was going. He kept whining about being late for a business deal. I figured the kind of people he dealt with didn't like to be kept waiting.

As soon as he disappeared down the dirt road in a puff of dust, I started breathing again.

"Come on," I said, grabbing David by the arm and leading him into the bedroom. "Time to pack."

I dragged a suitcase out of the closet and threw it onto my bed. David frowned. Then he tapped his book and plopped down on his own bed.

"You wouldn't understand. We haven't got time for that."

I emptied a dresser drawer into the suitcase. David crossed his arms on his chest and stared out the window, his blue eyes blank.

"Oh, all right."

I snatched up the book and a pencil. Quickly I sketched Frank and next I sketched a picture of a jail cell. I pointed to Frank and then to a rat picture. Finally I pointed to myself and then to the jail cell.

I don't know how much David understood, but his eyes darkened up and he dropped the pout to join me in a high speed packing job. The last thing I heaved into the back of the wagon was the strongbox.

Then I looked around for my brother. I'd seen him dash out the door in hot pursuit of a rat we'd found lurking in the closet not five minutes ago, but I hadn't heard a shot.

"David!" I called through cupped hands.

I started to worry when he didn't show up right away. The old quarry was about a quarter of a mile from the house down a side trail. David had followed rats that way before. What if he

stumbled and fell into the shaft that was so deep we couldn't see the bottom even with a flashlight?

I broke into a trot and when I stopped almost at the quarry's edge, I was breathing so hard I never heard a sound. Even so, when something hard pressed into the small of my back I thought David was behind me.

Relieved, I whirled around and looked straight into Frank's eyes.

"Going somewhere, Mikey? I noticed your gear all stowed away in your car." His voice sounded as smooth as oil floating on water. Frank took a step back, gripping his gun in his right hand and keeping it aimed in the general direction of my heart.

"Yeah, Frank." I laughed a little and felt sweat squirt out of little pores all over my body. "Just couldn't take the cabin fever any more. So what's with the gun?"

Frank's features stayed glued into the same expression, a bad sign for my continued good health. "I saw when I sold the merchandise that you've been poking your nose where it doesn't belong. That isn't nice, Mikey. And now I have to—ah—fire you a little sooner than I planned."

"Wait a minute. Let me explain. It was rats that broke

into the box, I swear it." I held my hands up, empty palms facing toward Frank, and gulped a few times.

I could see I wasn't making any headway, and I knew I never would. It was clear now that Frank had intended all along to sacrifice me just like when we were kids. Why hadn't I trusted my instincts and left when I first discovered the drugs?

"Look, I won't tell anyone. Let me go, Frank, I need to look after my brother." I was babbling, but my nervous system had shifted into some sort of overdrive. My heartbeat pounded in my ears and every detail of Frank's face stood out in sharp relief, as though the adrenalin surging uselessly through my body had given me super-human senses.

"This makes me sad. But I told you in the beginning, I got where I am by trusting no one. I work alone and I take care of every detail. *Every* detail. You understand, I can't leave any loose ends, so nothing personal, Mikey, but . . ." He shrugged.

Nothing personal. *That* made me feel a lot better. "People will come looking for me," I said desperately. I wondered if I'd have time to feel pain when the bullet slammed into me.

"No, Mikey, they all think you left town months ago."

I didn't lie. Frank knew me too well. If I had to die, it was because of my own stupidity and greed, but somehow I had to save David.

"Okay, Frank, do what you have to do," I said softly, lowering my hands. "But don't hurt David. He's innocent."

"I can't let him go. You know that. But I'll tell you what I'll do since we're old friends and all." He paused and wiped his forehead with his gunless hand, but I didn't mind having a few extra seconds of life and I didn't urge him to hurry.

"Your brother was sitting on the porch steps drooling when I drove up. After I'm finished with you, I'll slip up behind him and do him nice and easy, just like shooting a dog. The retard will never know it's coming, Mikey."

"He's not a retard," I said automatically, but I don't think Frank heard me because the bullet tore into his head just as I spoke.

David stepped out from behind the underbrush along the trail with the .32 dangling from his hand. I sank down with my

hands across my face and after I sucked in enough oxygen to make the effort, I crawled over and wasted a minute trying to find a pulse in Frank's neck.

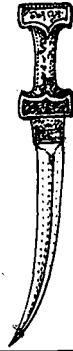
"Well, David," I said, hauling myself up off the ground, "I never could convince Frank you're not retarded."

We took care of our own loose ends, beginning with rolling Frank into the quarry and ending with pushing Frank's pickup, the guns, and anything else I thought might be incriminating, into the bottomless lake. But first I relieved the truck of its cargo—a suitcase full of more cash than I could count all at one sitting.

When it was time to leave, I slid into the front seat of the wagon next to my brother and picked up the keys. I still hadn't decided between California and New York and I hesitated.

David tapped me on the arm. I looked at him and he whipped his book open to a familiar picture.

"You got it," I said, jamming the key into the ignition. "Next stop, McDonald's."



FICTION

Murder in an Artificial Paradise

by Thomas Erikson

Editor's Note: This manuscript, found among the family papers of a distinguished New England clan, appears to be addressed to a distant relation of the family, most likely M. H. Adams.

Portions of the manuscript, and even separate sentences and phrases, alternate between unsure French and an archaic English best suited to the early nineteenth century. All of it is written in an erratic, senile hand often difficult to decipher. Thus, some liberty has been taken in the transcribing and translation to make it more easily accessible (or even comprehensible) to the interested reader. Only the appearance of certain well-known personages of the era urged the "dusting off" of this curious anecdote, which has little literary value.

It has been more than three decades since I last sat down to pen the mental exploits of my friend M. Auguste Dupin. The many circumstances that I related to you shortly after our first meeting, on the sands before Mont-Saint-Michel, have stayed my hand for still further years. Now that all are dead, principals and mere functionaries, I feel free to relate Dupin's most remarkable adventure.

My diaries tell me little. Only my memory serves me faithfully. I will limn only facts and forego my past speculation on the "diseased" brilliance of Dupin's mind.

Some years after the affair of the purloined letter, I returned to Paris. Naturally, I sought out Dupin. He was living in the Rue — in what was a solitary seraglio hung with richly patterned rugs, glimmering with brazen lamps, trays, and samovars, and miasmic with incense and hashish smoke that Dupin drew from a burbling hookah.

He was not fully the man I had known before, a victim of his own excesses. I think only the conundrum of the murder, and its threat to his revered Delacroix, could have roused him from his artificial paradise. But rise he did, with powers almost intact and perhaps, as he said, insight preternaturally enhanced.

I had, after several visits where I found him either in a stupor or brilliant but aggressive and annoying, slacked my visits to Dupin's apartments. Only by chance or Fate was I there when Baudelaire, that disreputable and morbid poet, came pounding at the door.

It was late and the manservant had been dismissed. Dupin an-

swered the pounding himself. As soon as a crack was parted, in rushed a short, dark man in a sweeping dandy's cloak. He was in obvious fear, peering over his shoulder to the street beyond the iron gate. We eyed each other as Dupin secured the door. The dandy's eyes were dark and gleaming hard like obsidian in the bony sockets and brow of a skull that seemed just below the skin. Thin lips pressed tightly together as his deep breaths flared his nostrils. His thin, dark hair lay on his high forehead, wet from sweat or the night's fog.

"Are you injured?" Dupin asked. Then I saw the blood on the dandy's shirt cuff.

"No," he said, his voice husky with shortened breath. As we retreated to the parlor, Dupin introduced us. My polite greeting received a curt nod.

"This is a private matter," said the infamous poet. "A matter for your, ah, deductive avocation."

Dupin smiled. "My friend here has aided me in solving some of my more challenging conundrums."

"This is a challenge of the opposite sort," Baudelaire said. Dupin raised his eyes in puzzlement. "We must speak alone."

Dupin graciously excused himself and took the poet into his library. The man's rude manner, his burning, nearly deranged look, and his strange entrance had certainly lived up to his odd reputation.

They were cloistered for nearly half an hour before they burst from the door. The two crossed the room without giving me a moment's regard. Dupin, close behind the poet, was saying, "Go tell Eugene not to return. Everything will be fine. Don't worry yourself. I'll meet you at De Boisdénier's shortly."

Baudelaire left with Dupin's reassurances in his ears.

Dupin's eye was now bright as I had not seen it since my return to Paris. He smiled at me and then chuckled.

"The—gentleman—did not seem to bring amusing news," I said, somewhat confused.

Dupin chuckled again. "He requested my genius—his words—be put to use to obscure the fact of a murder, an assassination, perpetrated among our mutual acquaintances."

My shock left me speechless. Dupin smiled once more. Then, as we put on our cloaks and left his house, he described the crime as Baudelaire had related it.

A small group of the infamous Club des Haschichins had gathered that evening at the Hotel Lauzan apartments of the musician

and poet De Boisdenier. The party had lounged about in their favored Oriental costumes and partaken heavily of the Arab drug. Not wanting to be disturbed, their host had locked the door against entrance.

This evening the hashish had been particularly strong, the hallucinations vivid, perhaps violent. It was De Boisdenier himself who had broken from his dreams to find a certain Villot sprawled in his own blood on the floor. He had been knifed through the heart with the costume blade of the renowned painter Delacroix.

"My God," I said in a hushed exclamation. We now walked briskly through the sparse late night crowd.

Dupin smiled again. "I doubt Eugene—or any of the Club des Hasch'ins—dispatched poor Villot."

"But," I exclaimed, this time too loudly, "you said they all were locked within."

"You and I have encountered a similar paradox before, have we not?"

I gave a nod, listening intently.

"The means of this murder may prove quite simple. But the motive? More murky than the madness of hashish dreams." He paused a moment. His lips pursed and he spoke softly and with less confidence. "At least I hope so for Delacroix's sake."

Fog caressed the jet black Seine as we crossed the ancient stone bridge to the Ile Saint Louis. Dupin walked as in a trance, staring at his own toes treading the wet cobbles. But unerringly he led us to the Hotel Lauzan. The porter let us into the foyer. I saw no sign on his face that he knew of the crime or its commotion. The gray, pinch-faced man merely gave a brief, familiar bow to Dupin and muttered, "Messieurs." He was apparently inured to the bohemian hours of the residents.

The building, however, was not one where one would expect to find a sordid crime. The pale green damasked walls were brightly lit by sconced, etched-glass lamps; frescoes of goddesses adorned the ceilings. As we climbed the first flight of stairs, Baudelaire clattered through the doors below. He ignored the porter's glare and climbed rapidly behind us. The poet merely nodded at Dupin's inquiring glance. We slowly climbed two flights without speaking. I sweated with trepidation, uncomfortably trapped between Dupin's deliberate tread and the panting of the infamous poet behind me.

Why, I asked myself, had I sought out Dupin again? These ugly occurrences seemed to seek him out.

(Days later, in a better mood, I said the same to his face. He laughed. It was I, he said, who seemed to him a harbinger of these bizarre episodes.)

A turbaned, swarthy Arab with long, black mustachios and turned out like a bazaar merchant opened the door to De Boisdenier's apartments and admitted us. The rooms were decorated much the same as Dupin's, though without the shadowy clutter, the hint of sinister treasure. Here the filigreed brass was polished, the rooms set like a stage for a Dumas play.

De Boisdenier met us in the parlor. He came from a moneyed family, I knew, but his reputation and circle of friends derived from his talents as a musician. He was a short, sallow, youngish man with a wispy twist of beard on his chin. And there was fear in his eyes. It took me a moment to realize that it was my presence that had caused it to flare higher.

"Do not worry, Boissard," Dupin said familiarly. He introduced me. "We have collaborated on some unique puzzles."

De Boisdenier sighed heavily. Then he dismissed the Arab with a wave of his hand. "Do not disturb us."

"I've kept him out of the room, but he knows," De Boisdenier said. "Even with the incense these Arabs can smell blood."

"And count," Dupin said dryly.

"And read our eyes," Baudelaire whispered. "Poor Eugene."

"How is he?"

"The princess is comforting him with brandies and the piano. She thinks he has had some horrid hallucination and curses you." The poet's grim lips turned slightly. "They've sent for Jenny to accompany him home."

While the two spoke, Dupin crossed the room to stand before a closed door. He drew a magnifying lens from his pocket and began examining the keyhole. The three of us gathered behind him as he changed his study to the crack between the door and the jamb.

"Is it locked?" he asked.

"No. The only key is still where we found it. Beneath Villot. Why do you view the lock? Has it been tampered with?"

"No," said Dupin. "I wish I could say so. As I recall, this lock can be turned by hand on the inside."

Evidently my friend had joined them in their stuporous revelry in the past.

"Correct."

"And the only key for entry is always in your possession."

"Yes. I give it to the Arab briefly to light the incense and take

in the decanters of wine as my guests arrive. But do not suspect him. He returns it immediately to my hand."

"And you to your pocket, I assume," Dupin said blandly. "Until, as Charles informs me, it was found under Villot's corpse."

De Boisdenier looked sharply at Dupin.

"Are you saying it was I who madly attacked Villot? You know how we thrash around in our robes! The key probably dropped to the floor long before Villot fell there." Now he raised his voice almost to a shout. "What is the point? It matters not, I hope, which one of us murdered in this cursed madness! You must aid us in some camouflage the police cannot penetrate."

De Boisdenier almost sobbed. "Besides, it was Delacroix himself with blood on his hands."

"What? Blood on his hands, too!" I cried in astonishment. I—and many others—revered Delacroix's great talents, his glowing, vibrant, romantic canvases. But this infamy would ruin him.

"Shall we enter?" Dupin asked briskly. He drew open the door, then paused, speaking over his shoulder. "Please step well over the threshold."

This high-ceilinged room was decorated like the others. It was thick with dead incense and crowded with a wide circle of wing-backed chairs. Here was the scene of horror.

The body of a man lay face down on the rich blue and gold Oriental rug. A thick stain of blood spread out from his form. Though his hair was reddish-blond, his dress was some odd cross of Arab and Zouave. A broad, curved dagger protruded from underneath his left shoulder.

Dupin ignored the body. He began slowly to circle the room.

"If you will just remain where you are," he said distractedly.

The three of us stood hushed, tense, and uncomfortable as Dupin investigated the windows, the panels, the floor along the walls. Occasionally he examined a detail with his magnifying lens. I could hear Baudelaire's teeth grinding and the breath snorting through his nostrils.

There was another door to the room; Dupin opened it and peered within. To my inquiring look Dupin muttered, "Water closet."

At last, unable to contain himself, De Boisdenier said, "Enough, Dupin! There is no stealthy exit. I think we should roll him in the carpet, distract the porter to the upper floors. We can carry him out in the dark and, God have mercy, consign his body to the Seine . . . then you—"

Dupin's look finally silenced him.

"The key was found beneath Villot? And the knife? Or was the knife in the flesh?"

De Boisdenier and I winced. Baudelaire took all in with a stony, patient glare. I think until that time the poet feared for Delacroix. Now he, like myself, suspected it might have been De Boisdenier's nightmare that murdered the unfortunate Villot. Still, our host too would deserve Dupin's aid. Hashish madness is no extenuating circumstance to a magistrate.

"You found the room's key beneath the body. Who moved him?"

"I," said Baudelaire. "Boissard's shouts woke me, then De Buel, from our reveries. I raised his—"

"By the left shoulder?" Dupin asked. When the man nodded, he asked, "How far?"

"Just enough to see he had been knifed in the heart. He was dead."

"And the key. Where was it? Exactly."

"Beneath him. Under his shoulder. Where it might be if it had fallen from the pocket of his blouse."

"Next to the knife then?"

"Yes."

"And the knife. Was its tip still in the wound?"

Baudelaire swallowed, quite loudly. His expression hovered somewhere between illness and consternation.

"No. No, it's all much like before I touched him."

The poet pursed his lips.

"Auguste," he said to Dupin, "it is Eugene's dagger. And tonight our imaginings—mine—were very wild. Wild, horrid—it matters little whose hand did this." He glanced at De Boisdenier. "If you do not help us hide this soon, we shall all five of us be ruined. And Delacroix, he has so much more to lose. If you cherish—"

Dupin held up his hand and seemed to ignore the plea. "The hashish. Wilder, stronger than on usual occasions?"

De Boisdenier and the poet exchanged glances.

"Much," Baudelaire said. "Very much. That is how this . . ."

Dupin had stopped beside the body. He called me over to help him. To my horror he asked me to lift the body enough so that he could view beneath it. I managed to quell my gorge and, grasping the man's hip and shoulder, drew him partly over.

Dupin first studied his face, then his chest, then got to his knees and peered through his lens at the knife, the key, and the blood-stain.

After some minutes in this awkward position I began to perspire and breathe heavily.

"Thank you," Dupin finally said. "Now lay him on his back."

It was not a sight to contemplate. The knife must have pierced the lung as well as the heart, for the blood obviously flooded the man's mouth; it was smeared over his face, soaked his arm and hair where he lay in its pool on the carpet. His life's blood, now clotted and half dry, made him truly horrible and pitiful. By contrast, the mortal wound that bloodily soaked the chest and belly of his blouse was but a minor stain.

Dupin picked up the murderous dagger and tested the edge gingerly. He plucked open the collar of Villot's blouse and momentarily studied the torn wound. Then he stuck the blade through the hole in the cloth and cut the blouse open to the belt.

Dupin set aside the knife and took up the magnifying lens to study the wound. I averted my eyes. With a gagging cry, De Boisdenier ran to the water closet where we heard him lose his gorge. Baudelaire seemed to survey the scene with a cold eye, but I saw he bit his lower lip.

Quickly Dupin shifted the lens once more to the stained carpet, to the key, back to the carpet. Rising, he strode to the nearest chair and pulled it over to the door and against the wall beside it. He climbed onto the chair, then stood with a foot on each chair arm, steadying himself with a palm against the wall.

He used the magnifying lens to hook the top of the door and draw it closer to him. Then he peered through it at the top edge of the door.

De Boisdenier emerged from the water closet and uttered a despairing croak. "Now what? You're mad yourself, Dupin. Why won't you help us?"

"In a moment," my friend said, stepping down to the floor. "Where are your servants?"

De Boisdenier sighed. "Only the Arab tonight. I ordered him to stay in the pantry until I call him."

"Good," said Dupin. He motioned to me. "Be kind enough to bring another chair out here."

Baudelaire, however, grabbed the nearest chair and pushed it out into the parlor, propping it against the wall as Dupin had done in the other room. The poet had read Dupin's intentions. Once again Dupin clambered onto the chair arms, this time made a brief survey of the lintel, and descended.

"I have a question for your servant," Dupin told De Boisdenier. "I'll call him."

"No, let's have him remain in the pantry."

Dupin led the way. He was obviously fairly familiar with De Boisdenier's apartments.

The sight of the four of us in the doorway obviously disconcerted the Arab. He jumped up from his chair at the back of the pantry and set a small cup of coffee on the counter. He looked inquiringly at his employer and wiped at his mustache.

"Don't worry," De Boisdenier said to him kindly. "Monsieur Dupin just has a question to ask you."

The Arab made a brief smile and nodded at Dupin.

Dupin nodded back and then spoke a string of half guttural, half nasal sounds. The Arab's eyes shot wide. His glance shot around the pantry as if looking for escape, but we four blocked the only exit. Dupin jumped forward as the Arab lunged for the knife block. His kick caught the man square in the crotch, lifting him from the floor. As the Arab bent and sank with a groan, Dupin's second kick knocked his head with a loud crack against one of the lower cupboards. The Arab lay still on the floor, making only a soft wheezing moan.

I stood rooted with shock at the sudden, inexplicable violence. Baudelaire pushed past me to stand in the middle of the pantry. He stared down at the Arab with bulging eyes.

"My God, good God. What is this, Dupin?" De Boisdenier finally exclaimed. I think we all knew what Dupin would reply.

"This is your murderer," he said simply.

"How—" he began to ask, but Dupin cut him off.

"You had better bind him."

De Boisdenier was obviously too confused to move. Baudelaire went to the back of the pantry, jerked down a long braid of garlic and unraveled it, and the two of us used the sturdy twine to tie the Arab's wrists together behind him.

Meanwhile Dupin had gotten into the cupboard below the small sink and brought forth the slop bucket. He was tossing discreet fingerfuls of coffee grounds and orange rinds into the dish tub. I only watched him a moment before he made a satisfied exclamation.

From the bucket he lifted what first seemed some noodle, but, looking closer, was a large wad of string. Shaking it and passing it through his fingers he found the end. Dupin held it up trium-

phantly. Two strands hung down from a knot he held between his fingers. One strand was slightly longer than the other.

The Arab was stirring. I placed my boot in his back. De Boisdenier leaned on the doorpost, slackjawed.

"Explain," Baudelaire said to Dupin.

"It struck me as odd, Charles, that your description of this violent murder—the tragedy, you said—mentioned no other disruption of the room. And that the blood on Delacroix's hands was just a few smears, rather dainty for a crazed assassin. And the key, which should under most circumstances be in De Boisdenier's pocket, was on the floor very near the corpse. Quite curious. If you had been dancing like dervishes—as sometimes I know one or two of you will—it would be less salient. But by your account you were all stupefied, paralyzed by your dreams. Such potent hashish is rare. And I know Boissard's Arab here procures it for him."

"Yes, suspicious." Baudelaire was agitated. "But what proof of murder? What did you say to the Arab? In Arabic, I could tell that much."

"Classical and badly accented. I'm lucky the man understood," said Dupin modestly. "But a moment, please, to describe my method."

"I still only had suspicions. And no means for anyone outside to murder and leave the room through a door locked from the inside with the only key still within."

"So I studied the lock for scratches, signs of reverse picking. There were none. I entered and studied the windows and walls. Nothing. Then I examined poor Villot's corpse."

"A great deal of blood came from his mouth. He lay with his head to one side, but blood was smeared all around both cheeks as if someone had quieted his scream. Delacroix's hands—perhaps just his left, true, Charles?—by your description were only slightly bloodied. Still, I considered it might have been Villot's own right hand clutching at his mouth. It was quite gory."

Dupin cleared his throat.

"But the stain from his heart was odd. He would bleed more, I thought, if such a large blade were thrust into his heart and pulled out. So it must have remained in his chest for, what, a minute? More? And if the body tumbled to the floor and the knife were knocked loose? For it to have come to rest where it did, halfway out from under him, meant it must have pushed loose at an extreme angle. The wound showed no such ravages."

"God, God." De Boisdenier shook his head.

"Yes, it is a horrible crime. But by studying the horror we trace the path of the criminal."

"Go on," Baudelaire and I said together.

"So the dagger's position was significant. And, of course, the most significant element of this mystery was the locked door and the key that opened it. In this constellation the knife lay between the door and the key. The key must have locked the door *after* the murderer had departed.

"The knife was obviously twice a tool in this crime. A knife's function is to cut. The obvious conclusion was that it was wedged beneath Villot so that it might cut a string. Indeed, there is a faint ray of blood issuing from the stain on the rug.

"Your Arab, Boissard, took the key you gave him to open the room. He returned a similar but bogus key immediately to your hand, and you placed it absently in your pocket. After you were all stupefied on the especially potent hashish—beyond any sense of the actual world—he entered, took the fake key from your pocket, took Eugene's dagger from his belt, and murdered Villot. Then he wiped some of the blood on Eugene's hands. He laid Villot's body on the dagger so that the knife would not move easily. Most likely he had already tied the key to the room to a long loop in a longer string. Quickly he laid the string along the floor and hooked it around the knife blade. As you may have noted, the dagger lay parallel to the door with the dull side of the blade away from it."

None of us, of course, had.

"Before closing the door, as he left, our murderer simply held the end he would pull on up above the latch, and the lower portion with the key below the latch. He shut the door carefully, locked the door with the key. The key, again, was loose on a small loop of string that was tied to the long loop. He locked the door with the key, drew it down the side of the door, and slid it under. Pulling gently, he could draw the key across the floor, tugging the string around the 'pulley' of the knife below Villot's body. The key would slide over the top of the blade, but be too thick to pass back under it. The Arab then pushed a chair up to the outside of the door, climbed on it, and drew the string up the side and along its top, angling the string against the sharp front edge of the blade. Drawing the string back and forth across the top, the loop at the end that held the key would be cut. Because the blade is sharply curved, only one point was cut, not two, so no string was left when he

severed the longer loop and pulled the entire length out of the room.

"Voilà!" said Dupin.

"Bravo," I said.

Baudelaire was studying the Arab. De Boisdenier was staring into space.

"There are fibers of this string along the top of the door. And a fleck of Villot's blood. Grease from the Arab's fingers is smeared there, too."

"But why?" I asked. "Why murder Villot? Why make it appear it was Delacroix? Why would this Arab do such a thing?"

All three of us now looked to Dupin.

"I told you that the motive would be the murkiest part of this mystery." He paused and poked the Arab's leg almost ruminatively, like someone idly turning over stones with his toe while lost in thought.

"He most likely has done this for money, perhaps from blackmail—who knows? But I assume he too is a tool. This scheme is not his own.

"Villot, he was the sacrificial lamb. Delacroix. Well, Eugene has many friends, many who follow his spirit. The *Liberty* on the barricades that he painted after the 1830 revolution still stirs a lot of hearts, and we know there are now a lot of new rumblings in Paris. The proletariat is simmering."

"They are indeed," declared Baudelaire.

"On the other hand, Eugene decorates Louis-Phillipe's halls." A smile briefly curved Dupin's lips. "And there are the new machinations over Algeria that Eugene's good friend De Mornay has a hand in.

"As I said, it is murky. But if I were Eugene I would watch my step. I'd take some time in the country at Champrosay. I would consider carefully what I exhibited at the next Salon."

An indecipherable look passed between Dupin and Baudelaire. Then Dupin heaved a sigh.

"Well, Boissard, don't you think it is high time you were informing the police? Though I suspect there are certain elements at the prefecture who have had these apartments watched for many hours."

De Boisdenier looked exhausted, unable to take the first step.

"Why don't you fetch us all some of your brandy," said Dupin. "I'll go down and send the porter. By the time the police are finished

taking our statements we can walk over to Les Halles for breakfast."

Dupin left the pantry. I remained standing with my boot in the Arab's back. Baudelaire stared after Dupin. Then he looked back at me with those hard, dark eyes.

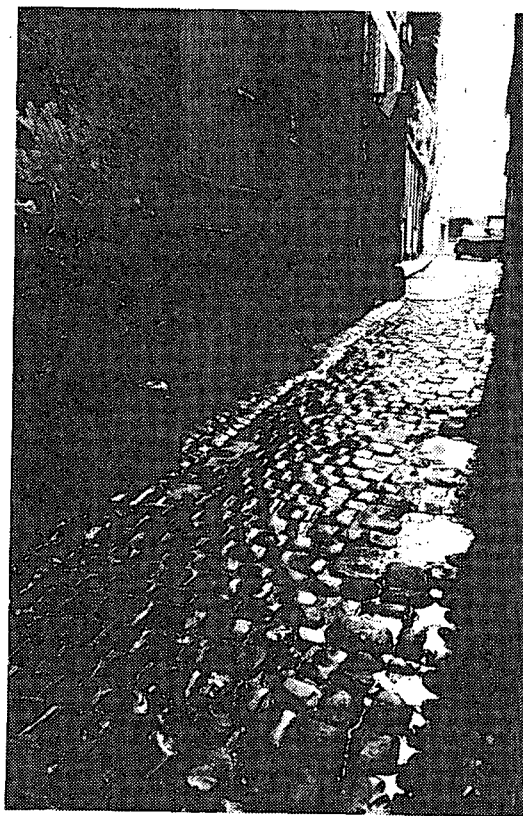
"Genius," he said and raised his eyebrows in wonder. The poet followed Dupin out of the room.

Surprisingly and fortunately this scandal found little play in the Parisian papers. The facts of the incident were somewhat changed, it being reported that poor Villot had been murdered for his wallet on the bridge over the Seine after a visit with friends at the Hotel Lauzan. His killer, one of the ever greater number of Algerians in Paris, had died trying to escape police custody.

Dupin's speculations received further weight when the revolution erupted the following February. Delacroix did spend much time in the country following the incident, and his paintings at the next Salon displayed few Arabs or allegories, but instead lovely flowers and wild beasts.

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THE MYSTERIOUS PHOTOGRAPH



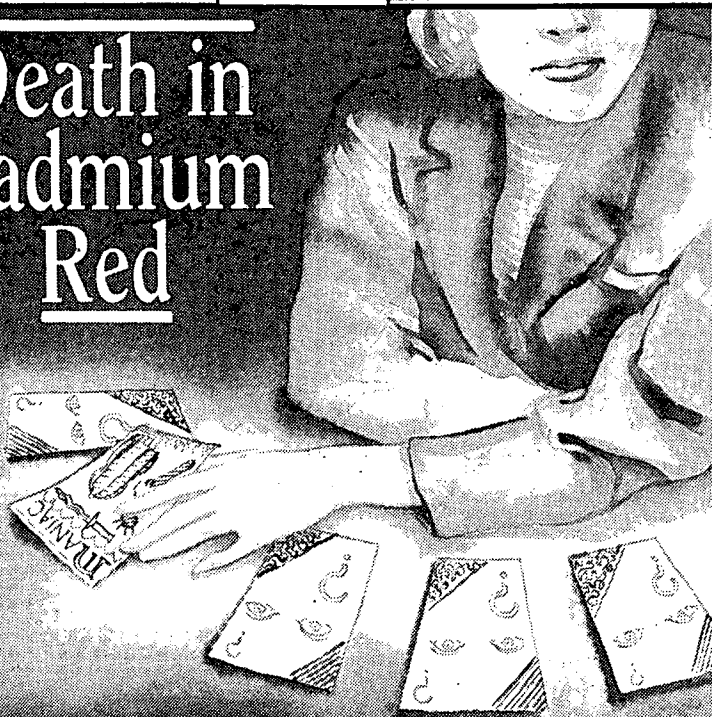
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The city's lean streets . . . We will give a prize of \$25 to the person who invents the best mystery story (in 250 words or less—and be sure to include a crime, please), based on the above photograph. The story will be printed in a future issue. Reply to Alfred Hitchcock's Mystery Magazine, 380 Lexington Avenue, New York, New York 10017.

The winning entry for the February Mysterious Photograph will be found on page 155.

FICTION

Death in Cadmium Red



by Robin
Mulkey

Most college students deal with a variety of pressures: competition for classes, grades, and even appointments with professors, or worse yet, teaching assistants. The majority of the public doesn't realize this fact. I think it's a result of too many sitcoms depicting the student's life as a round of parties, obnoxious practical jokes, and superficial relationships. Of course,

Illustration by Bradley H. Clark

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parties, obnoxious practical jokes, and superficial relationships are important to many students as a means to reduce stress. They're just not everything.

My friends and I had an unusual method of relieving tension. We stalked and murdered each other.

Our group was unusual, and not just because of our entertainment preferences. We were all in master's programs and mercilessly smug about it. Older than the majority of students, we looked down upon them with all the maturity that could be wrought by surviving our undergraduate years.

Since none of us had a car, we were bound to the campus, but we didn't mind. The university provided food and entertainment of various kinds and variously good or detrimental to mind and body, so we really had no need to leave.

We relegated the rest of the world to the magical land of "Off Campus" for nine months, and it was only during the summer that we had to cope with its foibles, the most notable being individuals under seventeen and over thirty.

Murder was our favorite form of amusement. Of course it was just a game, one that's played on many campuses. It goes under the names of Murder, Stalker, and Assassin. We called our exodus into pretend crime Maniac.

I suppose each group that participates in the game has a different set of principles, and the longer the game is played the more the rules accumulate. In our case, a session lasted seventy-two hours. The Victim was "safe" if in class, on the way to an appointment, on a date with a member of the opposite sex, or in the bathroom. The last rule was decided upon after I was stabbed to death in a bathroom stall. I don't think I've gotten over the humiliation yet. My roommate Sadie Dersham made her own regulations about murder weapons in direct reference to wardrobe after someone "nuked" her with a water balloon while she was wearing a new silk tunic.

Methods of murder varied. A chalk mark to the torso counted as a stab wound, spit balls acted as bullets, and a dose of Tabasco sauce administered to a victim's coffee was once officially declared arsenic.

Of course, the victim knew he or she was being stalked and, not knowing the identity of the killer, became increasingly paranoid about everyone and everything. Kiley Baines, a psychology major, said this was the most interesting part of the game. He even tried

to figure a way to work it into his master's thesis.

It was May the last time we played Maniac. I remember because the snow was melting, turning the sidewalks and parking lots into shallow lakes that we hailed with relief as a sign of spring. Surely flooding was better than freezing.

"This is so childish," Mary Fay Garza (accounting) said in tones of intense boredom. It was her turn to be Victim.

"Scared?" drawled Carla Lukowski. Carla's personality was abrasive at times, but we excused it on the grounds of artistic temperament. She sat with a sketchpad on her knee, scratching outlines onto paper with a carelessness that was a sign of her talent. Carla had her blonde hair cropped short except for her bangs, which constantly flopped into her eyes. I'd often thought that only the heavy black-framed glasses she wore protected her from possible retina damage.

"I'm not scared," Mary Fay protested. "I just have a lot of things going on now. My committee wants the third draft of my thesis this week."

"The draft that's been done for two days?" Kiley asked, lying on my bed and frowning as he contemplated the holes in the acoustical ceiling tiles. No one ever kept a secret from Kiley. He had a way of watching people through his gray eyes until the truth fell from their lips. He was rarely caught unprepared by surprise parties.

Mary Fay didn't bother to try to lie. She was trapped and she knew it. I wish now that we had been kinder to her and let her skip her turn to be Victim. Mary Fay had a superstitious streak. She had never approved of Maniac, feeling that we were tempting the fates, but enjoyed watching the rest of us play. She was very suggestible, and her own mind could produce images more horrifying than the rest of us could ever come up with. She avoided all horror or suspense movies, feeling much safer in her world of ledgers and numbers.

"Okay," she said in blasé tones that indicated the depth of her dismay. "Victim."

"All right," Kiley crowed. He hurriedly dug a set of index cards from his back pocket.

Carla had designed the cards specifically for use in Maniac. The deck included four Bystander cards, decorated with large wondering eyes and question marks. The single Maniac card bore several instruments of torture: an iron maiden, thumbscrews, and an ornate tombstone. Carla was very imaginative.

Kiley shuffled and we drew from the stack. I slapped my card against my chest and lifted the top edge to peek. Bystander. I wouldn't have admitted it, but I was relieved. I had been the Maniac once and failed miserably. After stalking Kiley's roommate Richard Johansen (math) for three days, I finally managed to talk my way into his room with a statistics book and a child's suction dart pistol. But I couldn't force myself to pull the trigger, and he became the only Victim to escape death that semester.

I glanced at him. Hmm. Poker face. I had never figured Richard out. In the fifth year of the six allowed master's candidates to complete their work, he still hadn't come up with a mathematical proposition for his thesis. I think he was terrified of leaving the structured haven that college provided. He was the quietest member of our group. Of average height, Richard wore a shaggy brown beard, mostly to cover the blushes that appeared on his face whenever a stranger talked to him. Despite his shyness, a pair of black lace women's panties hung from his mirror.

Carla had dropped her card face down on the linoleum and was drawing again, using what we called her "Dissection Expression," the one that stripped a person down to muscle and bone so she could build them up again on paper. I noticed that the look was directed at Mary Fay, but it usually was. Carla had rhapsodized about Mary Fay's cheekbones and jawline more than once.

Kiley had produced a small notebook and was scribbling as he glanced at each of us. Obviously the experiment was on. Sadie, who majored in elementary education, placed her card in the center of the floor and ran a caressing hand over a nearby pile of textbooks. I loved Sadie dearly. I felt she was going to be a wonderful teacher, simply because a part of her had never grown up. This was balanced by her almost fanatical need to study. Since she had a 4.0 grade point average throughout her college career, I figured it was a workable combination.

The rest of the group followed her lead by placing their cards face down over hers. Kiley gathered them up and shuffled. "Mac?" he asked, and I realized I was still clutching my card like a heroine in a Victorian melodrama embracing the deed to a threatened family property. Slowly I pushed my card into the deck Kiley held.

I'm Esther Louise Makelky, a name forced upon me when my parents decided to christen me after both of my grandmothers. Happily, early on, one of my playmates dubbed me "Mac," and the name stuck. Few people know about Esther Louise, and even fewer

would dare call me that. I study history, and I feel it's given me a realistic if slightly cynical perspective, which is that there's no happy ending in real life, folks, even the good guys die in the end.

All attention turned to Mary Fay. She was already taking on a feral look, studying each of us thoughtfully. As a person we smiled back, showing our teeth.

"God," she said in disgust. She stood up, letting her waist-length black hair swirl around her body. "I'm going to bed."

"You have till midnight before the hunt begins," Kiley called helpfully. Mary Fay gave him her opinion of his parentage and left the room. Kiley shrugged, not at all hurt by her temper. We all listened until we heard her door slam, the sound echoing down the hall. I could swear I heard the lock snick into place.

Kiley chortled and wrote furiously in his notebook.

That was the last time I saw Mary Fay. The next morning she was found at the base of the oldest building on campus, which housed a complete set of bell chimes in its tower. The official verdict was suicide by jumping.

"Christ," Carla said mournfully when she found out. "That bone structure."

We didn't go to the funeral. Mary Fay's parents arrived from their home five hundred miles away that evening, clad in black and speaking carefully learned English. They were Mexican immigrants, but would have recoiled in horror at the term "Mexican-American." They were American now, just American, and made sure everyone knew it, even to the point of giving their daughter the most Anglo-Saxon name they could think of. They were Catholic and Mary Fay's suicide had devastated them. We met them over coffee in the Student Union cafeteria before they prepared to take Mary Fay's body back to her home town.

"It doesn't figure," Kiley said after they had gone. I frowned into my teacup, hoping this wasn't going to become another discourse on the human psyche.

Carla obviously felt the same way, and had no hesitation about saying so. "I don't think any of us are in the mood for a psychological profile now, Kiley." She doodled on her napkin with the edge of her spoon, indenting the tissue with an intricate design.

Around us teenagers laughed as they bought the most unnutritious foods available. Suddenly I felt very old. We were a sombre

group in the midst of that color and life. Out of respect for Mary Fay we had decided to dress in old fashioned mourning to meet her parents. Carla had worn a dark navy top and pants, the closest she could come to black. Everyone appreciated her effort.

"I think Kiley's right. It doesn't fit," Richard put in. "Do you remember the time we were hanging crepe paper for the Christmas party? Mary Fay wouldn't climb a ladder to help because she was afraid of heights."

"She couldn't have been rational when she jumped," Sadie pointed out. Her eyes sparkled and she blinked several times. "If something was wrong, why didn't she talk to one of us? It's just not fair. . . ." Her voice broke and I gave her a quick hug. Sadie felt things so deeply.

Kiley stood up. "I guess this isn't doing us any good. I'm for having a drink, then trying to get back to normal."

It seemed like a reasonable idea in the middle of an unreasonable situation. Sadie and I trailed back to our room, and I dropped onto my bed. Richard was right, Mary Fay had been terrified of heights. So why would she choose that method of killing herself?

I noticed that Sadie had curled up on her bed and was holding a green velvet dragon with gold wings, one in her large collection of stuffed animals. We looked at each other, but neither of us could find the words to break the growing depression settling over us. I was glad the others were coming.

A staccato knock rattled the door, and Kiley came in carrying a jug of cheap wine. Without a word Sadie went to the soda machine in the lobby to buy several cans of 7-Up. Richard arrived with a package of Styrofoam cups; then Carla strolled in with a box of cookies. She was dressed in fluorescent purple jeans and a pink blouse, as though she were distancing herself from the mourning navy she had worn.

Sadie and I served the others, then poured equal amounts of wine and 7-Up into our cups. As spokesman, Kiley intoned a few words about Mary Fay, and we toasted her with carbonated wine.

That was our farewell to Mary Fay. It wasn't much, but it was all we were able to manage. We went our separate ways soon after. Sadie filled her backpack and left for the library. Studying was her favorite form of escape. Kiley and Richard departed with the last of the wine, and Carla and I remained behind to devour the cookies. But before breaking up, we had all agreed to meet for breakfast in the cafeteria the next morning.

As usual, Carla was late. It didn't worry me at first. She was especially creative in the ungodly hours of the night and often worked late. Claiming she worked best under pressure, she generally finished an assignment just hours before it was due. This also helped insure that she didn't have to bother with a roommate, since so far none of them had been tolerant of her hours.

As time passed I began to grow more restless. The chair Carla always occupied appeared as barren as if no one had ever sat there. I've often wondered if I felt some buried foreknowledge.

Sadie and Richard had early classes, so they ate quickly and left. I finished my granola and stared into my last cup of orange spice tea. At last I couldn't stand it any longer and got to my feet.

"What is it?" Kiley asked, interrupting his own sentence on common sexual disorders. It had become a theme of his lately, but I hadn't taken time to wonder why.

"I'm going to check on Carla. I'll see you later."

"Wait a minute. I'll go with you." He took a final gulp of coffee and pushed back his chair. I felt better having him with me. His pragmatic attitude could be counted on to calm the most hysterical person.

As we walked back to the dorm we didn't talk. Some of my nervousness had infected Kiley, and I knew that when we found Carla sleeping off a night of painting I would be in for a serious lecture on giving in to my imagination.

When we reached Carla's room I knocked loudly.

"Phew!" Kiley wrinkled his nose. "What's that smell?"

"Turpentine?"

He began to pound on the door, and the occupants of several nearby rooms stuck their heads into the hallway to complain about the noise. It was still early, they informed us with varying degrees of politeness, and would we stop all the racket? Lips thinning, Kiley ignored them and began to call Carla's name.

"What is this?" We turned to see that the floor advisor had arrived, and was watching us with long-suffering eyes.

Kiley explained and her expression of resignation turned to concern. Pulling a pass key from her pocket she unlocked the door and swung it open.

Carla was there, and we knew immediately why she hadn't answered.

She was hanging from a light fixture.

“I still can’t believe it,” Sadie said, her voice revealing the depth of her shock.

I took a deep sip of tea, strong and laced with honey.

My fingers had a disconcerting habit of shaking when I didn’t concentrate on keeping them still. Carla’s face kept flashing through my mind, and I discovered that squeezing my eyes shut didn’t block out the memory.

Kiley finished telling Sadie and Richard about what we’d found in Carla’s room. He shook his head. “Manic-depressive, sure, but psychotic?” He scribbled moodily in his notebook. “If it weren’t for the sketch . . .”

The drawing had been propped on Carla’s easel, the paper still attached to the spiral pad. Done in charcoal, it depicted Mary Fay wearing a look of deep concentration. It was an expression we were all familiar with, signaling her most introspective mood.

The portrait was good. Unfortunately, the most memorable aspect of the sketch wasn’t Carla’s skill or technique. It was the sentence sprawling over the paper, slashing into Mary Fay’s face. Thick globs of red formed the letters, the paint tube now lying empty on the floor. The sentence stated, “Sorry, Mary Fay.”

“I’ll never think of the color of death as black again. I think it’s really cadmium red,” Sadie said, running her finger over the design on her bedspread.

We sank into a glum silence. We had no doubt that the words on the portrait were a confession. Mary Fay’s death had been murder, not suicide.

“Do you think it’s connected to the game?” Richard asked, his face pale.

“*Maniac*? She’d have to be crazy—” I realized what I was saying and broke off. My hands started to tremble again.

“So much has happened in two days.” Sadie shook her head. “It doesn’t seem possible.”

“There’s more good news,” Kiley said. “Carla’s mother wants to meet with us tomorrow.”

Everyone groaned.

I met with Carla’s mother the next afternoon. Sadie, Kiley, and Richard, the cowards, backed out at the last minute, and I was left to face Mrs. Lukowski alone.

She was divorced, and upon seeing her it was even more difficult to envision where Carla got her flair for the dramatic. Her mother

was, well, ordinary. Just an ordinary woman who had worked hard to send her daughter through college. She had been confused at Carla's choice of art as a major, preferring that she study something she could use to get a "real" job, one that lasted nine to five. Nevertheless, she had been carefully supportive.

Like the Garzas, Mrs. Lukowski was confused and frightened. Needing to hold on to the familiar, she talked non-stop about Carla's older sister, who (eyes closed in relief) had already married and had a child. She was stable, that one (hand over heart), a real trouper. I looked at a picture of Carla's older sister, and agreed that yes, she did seem firmly rooted in reality. Mrs. Lukowski studied the picture again to reassure herself, then nodded and put it back in her purse. Carla was not mentioned by name.

Sadie was gone when I got back to our room. I hoped fervently that I never had to go through a week as bad as this had been. Changing into a pair of jeans, I went to the trash bins located at the rear of the dorm. Mrs. Lukowski had asked me to pack up Carla's room, and I wanted to get the job done as quickly as possible. I managed to collect several empty cardboard boxes, some still boasting the lingering scent of laundry soap.

Outside Carla's door my imagination began running wild. What would the room be like now? I had fuzzy expectations, left over from an English melodrama, of a mysterious aura of tragedy hovering in the atmosphere. But what I found was unexpected. The curtains were open and the late afternoon sunlight streamed in through the windows with sacrilegious brightness. No melancholy filled the air, just a cheery emptiness that was all the more depressing by its impersonality. I dropped the boxes on the floor and shut the door behind me.

All traces of Carla's death had been removed, not just her body but the nylon jumprope she had used to hang herself. Jumping rope had been Carla's favorite form of exercise. To this day I can't pass a playground filled with children without remembering her.

Not wanting to think about what I was doing, I began sorting through the drawers, lifting out piles of underclothes and sweaters and placing them directly in boxes. Carla's perfume hung in the fabric and I opened a window to drive the scent away.

I started to think about Carla and death. I'm sure that most campuses have a haunted dorm, the halls of which resound with the uncanny wails of suicides bemoaning unfair grading practices and sadistic professors. I wondered if Carla would be incorporated

into campus legend, but I couldn't envision her flitting from shadow to shadow dressed in filmy white like a traditional ghost. She was more the type to stride down the main hall in shocking pink.

That image made me feel better and I was able to continue loading boxes and stacking them against one wall. Mrs. Lukowski had promised to have them picked up later.

It didn't take long to dispose of Carla's wardrobe, which consisted mostly of sweaters and jeans. I packed her books, then moved on to the artwork. Most of it hung on the walls, but I also found a few completed canvases under the beds. I wrapped the paintings in brown paper before labeling them and piling them in one corner.

After a few hours of work, the drawers were empty and the walls bare. Carla's personality had been successfully erased from the room, and I felt guilty for being the person to accomplish the task. Sighing, I turned to the one object I hadn't touched.

The sketchpad still sat on the easel in the center of the floor. The ropes of red acrylic had congealed but were still wet under the crust. I knew because the letters depressed under my finger but left no smear on my skin. I wiped my hands on my jeans anyway.

Sorry, Mary Fay.

Three short words and an unimaginable vocabulary of pain behind them. I hoped that Carla had found peace.

I noticed the paint tube lying on the linoleum. A last drop had oozed into a circle on the tile, a bright red period, the final punctuation at the end of Carla's life. Picking up the crumpled tube, I unrolled it and ran a finger over the black letters printed on the label. Cadmium red. The tube made a metallic sound as it hit the bottom of the garbage can.

After cleaning the paint from the floor I regretfully closed the cover of the sketchpad and stuck it in a box. The gesture was significant. The Carla I had known was really gone.

Sadie was stretched out on her bed studying when I entered our room. I had often admired her ability to retreat into small compartments in her mind. It allowed her to concentrate on one subject at a time to the exclusion of everything else.

I felt restless. Glancing out the window I was surprised at how quickly the day had passed. The idea of walking through the crispness of an early spring evening appealed to me, and I grabbed up my white ski jacket. Sadie only looked vague when I told her I was leaving.

My walk lasted a long time. The air had the same effect as a

cool shower, washing away the fear and uneasiness that cluttered my mind in the same way water would have cleansed dirt from my skin. Only a few other people strolled nearby, most preferring the warmth of their rooms.

When I found myself wandering through a large stand of trees called the Wildwood, I realized just how far I'd come. About half an acre in size, the Wildwood had been preserved as the campus grew, partly as an attempt to allow the students a place of greenness away from the concrete of the sidewalks and buildings. Only a narrow pavement ran through the Wildwood, and I was abruptly aware of my own stupidity. Campuses at night are not the safest places for women walking alone, and I was in an isolated area. I turned and began heading back.

But I hadn't gone more than a hundred feet when I saw someone coming toward me. I hesitated, remembering several horror stories.

Great, just great. Why had I bothered to come out here, I wondered, only to get myself mugged?

Then I recognized the person. "Sadie," I called, and heard the relief in my voice.

She broke into a jog and panted up to me. "Are you okay? You were gone so long that I was worried."

We fell into step. "I was just thinking about Mary Fay and Carla." Sadie didn't say anything and we moved on in a companionable silence.

The darkness was broken only by the lights that had been placed every twenty yards or so along the sidewalk. Shaped like Victorian-era lamps, they were more decorative than useful, and shed only a dim golden glow, just enough light to turn the leafless trees into flickering shadows. The network of branches reminded me of the charcoal lines on Carla's sketch, streaked with red. Something about that color . . .

"How did you know the paint on Mary Fay's portrait was cadmium red?" I asked. I'm not sure who was more surprised by the question, Sadie or me. I don't think I'd consciously thought about it until that moment.

In my memory Sadie's voice said, "I'll never think of the color of death as black again. I think it's really cadmium red." Then I stood in Carla's room again, holding the paint, the name of the shade visible only once I'd unrolled the tube.

And Sadie had known. Cadmium red. But she hadn't gone with Kiley and me to check on Carla after breakfast, hadn't even seen

Carla's room. Sadie had heard the story from Kiley, and he had described the color just as red.

Sadie had known. Cadmium red. Not carmine, nor scarlet, nor crimson, but cadmium red.

I had stopped in the middle of the sidewalk, lost in one of those rare moments of sudden comprehension that most of us would prefer to avoid. Muddled facts became painfully clear. When I looked at Sadie she was watching me inquisitively. A knife had appeared in her hand, but she seemed unaware of it. The knife was large, the kind designed for the hunting enthusiast, complete with a compass set into the handle and a long, curved blade to ease the work of gutting game. Stray light from one of the lamps turned the metal gold.

I'd like to be able to say that suddenly I saw all the insanity in Sadie that I'd never observed before. But her eyes didn't reveal themselves in madness. She was just Sadie, the same as she'd always been; a little shy, a little too serious, still wearing an expression of concern that marked her my friend.

"It's the game," she said gravely, and the golden blade flashed. I jumped back, but heard the sound of tearing cloth. I saw a rip in the sleeve of my jacket and felt an instant of relief, thinking the steel edge had missed me. Then a large stain, black in the dim light, flowed over the white fabric. I still didn't feel any pain. I guess that's one of the incongruities of the human body. A paper cut and the pain is irritating and immediate. A large wound and the body shuts down its pain circuits in sympathy.

Sadie didn't strike out again, but I saw a black smear on the knife that matched the spreading stain on my sleeve. She was a study in sincerity, holding her empty hand toward me as though needing reassurance that I understood her position.

"This place," she said. "It's like another world where everything is pretend. The things we do here, they don't have a place outside. You work and work and work and get what? A letter. Just a letter, a piece of the alphabet. And you take that letter to anyone outside a campus and it means almost nothing. Not all the work and the worry and trying. But something has to be made real here. That's what I'm doing. When I got the Maniac card, I knew I'd finally found a way."

I didn't answer. I couldn't. My brain was finally clicking in, shrugging off the shock of the wound. The instinct to survive rose from the depth of my subconscious in a warm wave that made my

heart pound. Automatically, I began checking off possibilities in my mind.

Sadie was still talking. "Mary Fay, she understood. She wanted it."

I managed past dry lips, "How did she want it?" Could I outrun her? She had an aerobics class every day and was in good shape. Why the hell had I given up jogging?

"Mac, I went right up to her," Sadie said, her voice a mixture of contempt directed at Mary Fay and awe at her own daring. "*Right up to her!* Can you believe it? And I said, 'I'm going to have to kill you, Mary Fay.' She was relieved. She said, 'Okay, just get it over with. My class starts in ten minutes.' We went up to the roof of the bell tower. It took some talking, but she was so anxious to get to her eight o'clock class that she went. Then I pushed her. Her face, when she understood . . ."

Sadie lapsed into silence. I measured my chances of fighting her for the knife and decided the odds weren't good. The numbness in my arm was complete and I could see blood (cadmium red?) dropping from my fingertips.

"Carla wasn't as easy," Sadie reflected, as though discussing a difficult assignment. I knew then that talking to her would get me nowhere. I would have to run.

"Why not?" I asked, keeping my eyes on her face. I didn't want to give her a hint of what I was planning. An especially thick growth of underbrush bordered the path, and if I could get away from her in the darkness, I had a chance. Just a chance.

Sadie frowned, and a line burrowed between her eyebrows. "She kept saying my name."

I ran. It caught Sadie by surprise. I looked at her steadily until the last possible moment, then I sprinted to the left. She was slow to respond, wrapped in her memories and her madness. By the time she realized what I was doing, I was almost to the bushes. I heard her scream, and the sound burned into my ears to give me an extra boost of adrenaline.

Then I was out of her sight, diving through the bushes. I hit the ground and rolled smack into a log. My arm came to life with a purple burst of pain, but I figured that was good. At least it wasn't paralyzed.

Scrambling forward on my knees and one hand, I gained my feet and started to run.

In that instant I retrogressed a million years. Life was reduced

to the hunter and the hunted, and I was in the least enviable role. I saw more clearly than I had ever seen before, glancing around, observing the landscape, dismissing the unlikely hiding spots. At the same time I listened for sounds of pursuit, feeling my ears move as though pricking in the direction of an unexplained noise.

I was thankful for the cheap administration policy that had put poor lighting in the Wildwood. All I needed was a dark place, a space to crawl into and hide, letting Sadie pass by. She'd be listening for movement, for panting breaths, sniffing for the scent of panic.

When I stopped at last, my heart was pounding and the air rasped painfully in my throat. I held my breath to listen but heard nothing. I had lost Sadie in the trees, at least for now. I knew she was still following. Trying to decide on a new direction, I raised my uninjured arm to wipe fear-induced sweat from my forehead and was shocked at the brightness of my jacket. Even in the gloom the white material was luminescent. I unzipped it, then struggled to get it over my wounded arm. I wasn't particularly careful and my arm throbbed. Dropping the jacket I moved away, taking care to be quiet. I was comfortable with the rest of my clothes, jeans and a deep blue sweater. Dark enough not to gain attention.

The back of my head felt cold, a sure sign I was going to pass out. Finding a hiding place became even more critical. If I was going to faint, it would be somewhere close to the ground.

I steadied myself by breathing deeply and peered through the trees. I found the perfect spot not ten yards from where I had dropped the jacket. Several saplings had been uprooted, probably by rambunctious freshmen during an illegal beer party. Thrown carelessly in a pile, they had been overgrown by weeds. The result was a feathery mound of rotting wood with a gap about five feet long in the middle. If I lay there partially covered by weeds, Sadie would never realize it was my hiding place. Or so I hoped.

It took only a few seconds to wedge myself down into the dead trees, which were damp and smelled of decay. Why is it, I wondered to the sky, that I couldn't be stalked by a crazed lunatic on a warm summer evening?

But I felt better. The dizziness faded and I made myself comfortable on one side with my knees drawn up.

Suddenly I heard a growl. It sounded like a dog, and the hairs on the back of my neck rose. But what would a dog be doing here? Daring only to move my eyes, I peered to the right. I saw Sadie

through a hole in the weeds. *She* was growling. She had found my jacket and I was awash in such a wave of relief that I had to bite my lower lip to keep from crying. Thank God I'd dumped that coat!

Sadie held it in one hand, the knife in the other. She stared at the jacket, and I don't think she was aware of the sounds coming from her throat. She slashed wildly at the material, then threw the tattered remains onto the ground.

The breeze blew a shred of fabric to rest against the pile of wood that hid me. Sadie went silent and began to turn in place, around and around, searching the landscape with her eyes. Searching for me.

It wasn't hard to remain perfectly still. Terror accomplished that for me.

Sadie continued to revolve in that circle soundlessly, and she reminded me of a jewelry box I'd been given as a little girl. A tiny ballerina had occupied the box. When the lid was lifted, the ballerina pirouetted on a mirror base, out of time to the tinkling music of *Swan Lake*. Sadie was like the ballerina, spinning with an expressionless face, out of time, out of touch.

Then she was gone.

I blinked. I could hear her moving away, still looking for me. A crack sounded as she stepped on a twig, paused, rustled a branch, paused, then was gone.

Normal night sounds became audible again, the breeze in the trees and the occasional chirp of a sleepy bird. Unable to relax, I unclenched my muscles only when the discomfort grew too strong to bear. Time dragged by, but I didn't dare move. Any unexplained noise resulted in a sudden surge of adrenaline that left me trembling from the effort not to run. I couldn't be sure that Sadie wasn't somewhere nearby, waiting for me to reveal myself.

Finally the fear and exhaustion combined to ease me into a doze. When I opened my eyes again I saw that dawn had come. I jerked, confused about where I was and why. Then I remembered and subsided back into my hiding place. Around me a few birds landed in the sprouting grass to listen for worms. In the distance I heard the voices of two joggers as they slapped by on the pavement.

My only thought was to reach help. Sadie retreated back into the nightmares of darkness. I tried to struggle out of the fallen trees but failed. My injured arm was sore and hot, and I was afraid it was infected. I forced the muscles in my good arm to prop myself up, and they responded grumpily. My legs were stiff, and I rubbed

them for several minutes to restore the circulation. When I felt prepared to move, I edged out of the trees and stood, then found myself on my fanny as my legs gave way. Obviously I wasn't ready to travel yet.

The joggers had passed, so I sat glumly pounding my legs and rotating my ankles. I finally managed to stand and stumbled forward a few yards. I wasn't graceful, but at least I was vertical. I soon became accustomed to walking again, and began the trek back to the dorm.

Only a few birds paid me any attention. When I saw my building, it looked big and wonderfully normal. It takes a night on the ground to appreciate the luxuries of life. All I could think about was a hot shower.

I let myself into the lobby and stepped into a vacant elevator. No one saw me and I was thankful, not wanting to get delayed making explanations. I just wanted to talk to Kiley before calling the police. I carried a vestige of concern for Sadie despite what she'd done, and I wanted to make sure the police treated her as gently as possible. Then I wanted them to slap her into a padded cell and bolt the door.

The hallway was empty. I had slid the key into the lock of my door before I realized that Sadie might be in the room. I had assumed that she was either searching the Wildwood or had left the campus. But she hadn't been too rational the last time I'd seen her.

I turned the knob cautiously. No response from inside the room. Heartened, I threw open the door and flicked on the light. The room was deserted. I slumped in relief, then entered.

That was when I got the first glimpse of myself in the mirror. I shuddered. Blood and mud decorated my face and clothes. My hair spiked out in a fashion I'd seen on campus but had never thought was my style, adorned with twigs and bits of dead leaves. Under the grime I was pale, and I turned away from my reflection.

Then I saw the knife on Sadie's desk.

It was the same one Sadie had used, my blood now a dirty reddish-brown on the blade.

The door opened behind me.

"Hey," Sadie caroled in her most cheerful voice. She was dressed and looked freshly washed. "Where've you been?" Sadie had always been especially lighthearted in the morning, but I appreciated it less now than at any other time.

I jumped away and my legs slammed into the edge of my bed.

I went down flat on my back. Opening my mouth to scream I managed only a faint "Eeep."

Sadie ran a comb through her hair. "What classes do you have today? I have an early seminar, that's why I'm up. I don't think I'll be back for lunch." She looked at me and frowned. "I hope you're not coming down with something. You seem kind of quiet."

I took a deep breath, determined to scream, and gave a firm "Arrgh."

This was ridiculous! I hit the mattress with one fist, then froze as Sadie approached her desk.

Quick, think! I demanded of myself. Fight her off, run, SCREAM!

Sadie gave the knife an absentminded frown and slipped it into a drawer. I watched with fascination, and she noticed the direction of my gaze. "Don't be silly," she laughed. "The seventy-two hours were up at midnight. I guess you beat me at the game after all."

She closed the door quietly when she left.

I try not to think about Sadie too much any more. She's in a nice place, paid for by her parents. When the police questioned her, she admitted with a trace of embarrassment that she had killed Mary Fay and Carla. I heard she was still puzzled about why such a fuss was being made over a game.

Richard finally came up with a thesis topic and finished his degree with a month to spare. Soon afterward he enrolled as a freshman in the computer science program. Apparently he's found his niche and has no plans to leave the university.

Kiley has a new subject of study, which he is using to gain his doctorate. Me. He says that he is observing the long term effects of a sudden, short burst of violence directed at a (fairly) normal person, and I should make a good case study.

I'm not sure about that, but when I wake up dreaming of blood and the smell of rotting leaves, it helps to have Kiley talk to me in his hoarse, middle-of-the-night voice. And he never writes down anything I say in his notebook.

UNSOLVED

by Julie Spence

Unsolved at present, that is, but can you work it out?

The answer will appear in the August issue.

Mystery author Blaze Chandler dedicated each of his first five novels, including *The Millstone Mystery*, to one of his five children. From the clues below, can you determine each child's name, current age (none is older than eighteen and all ages are in whole years), and the name of the novel dedicated to each?

1. *Private Puzzle* was dedicated to a girl who is half as old as her brother Van, who is half as old as his sister Ann.
2. Blaze dedicated *Fritz's Fantasy* to the child who is three years younger than his son Dan.
3. Blaze dedicated *Worried Willy* to a child who is younger than his daughter Jan.
4. Blaze's nine-year-old child is not the one to whom he dedicated *The Carlton Charade*.
5. *Fritz's Fantasy* was dedicated to a child nine years older than Nan, who is at least two years old.

See page 134 for the solution to the June puzzle.

"Dedicated to the Ones I Love," reprinted courtesy of Dell Magazines, © 1988 a division of Bantam Doubleday Dell Publishing Group, Inc.

Ruthless Ralph

—by Elana Lore—



Ralph had just come from the bank when the funny rumbling noises started. It sounded like heavy artillery being fired. He looked up and down the broad sweep of 42nd Street, but there was nothing out of the ordinary—no shootouts, no parades, no ma-

niacal characters with boom boxes lurking around. In New York, noises like that could be anything. Then the ground started shuddering and heaving, and great gouts of pavement began to rise and crack and fall back.

Ralph ran for the nearest

doorway and cringed in a corner. The building he chose to cheese out in was an old prewar monstrosity with heavy metal gratings, walls several feet thick, and a large covered entryway, so Ralph wasn't alone for long. Soon the small area resembled the F train at rush hour—masses of unwashed bodies packed together like sardines.

Someone in the crowd yelled, "It's an earthquake!" and a general sense of panic rose amidst the throng.

The only person who seemed to be keeping his cool was a fellow in a green suit who announced out of the blue in a loud, tremulous voice that his name was Reverend Mike and God had told him the world was going to end at precisely eleven seventeen. Whether that was A.M. or P.M. was unclear. He was treating his captive audience to a fire-and-brimstone sermon on the Second Coming, complete with graphic descriptions of various sins (many of them available at low cost in nearby Times Square) that would get you fried for sure in Satan's vast, rat-filled cauldrons.

On the street, automobiles and buses were careening into one another like bumper cars, and things were falling from the sky. Ralph watched as a huge slab of freshly polished glass descended, catching the

light in rainbow colors, and shattered on the pavement like water splashing in a pool. That was rather pretty, he thought—unlike the humongous pieces of metal and concrete that were also falling. They looked like things that ought to stay put.

He shook in horror each time something fell near him, but no matter how terrified he was, he never loosened his grip on his briefcase. Inside was the remainder of his worldly goods, according to the bank. Ruth had cleaned out all the other accounts yesterday.

Someone jostled Ralph, and he clutched the briefcase even closer to his chest.

"Hey, ain't you Uncle Ralphie?" the man said.

"Yes," Ralph said curtly.

"I thought so. I seen your commercial on TV. My ole lady went to that party at your store yesterday. She bought a toaster oven."

"That's nice. I hope you get a lot of use out of it," Ralph said through a gritty-toothed smile.

"Strange weather we're having, ain't we?" the guy said, as though there weren't an earthquake quaking around them.

"Yes," Ralph agreed, turning and pretending to look at something fascinating on the street. The ploy worked. The man stood on his toes to see what was happening, leaving Ralph to his thoughts.

The party had been to celebrate the twentieth anniversary of Uncle Ralphie's Rebuilt Appliances. Ralph had been working on it for months. He had even made his own TV commercial, complete with dancing girls, confetti, and balloons, which was where he had met Hallie. She was really a model, but she had terrific legs, and she danced okay enough for the commercial.

He was truly in love with her—or at least his hormones were. He hadn't had this much sex since . . . well, ever. Ruth didn't encourage that kind of stuff at home. And Hallie was beautiful—big blue eyes, blonde hair, that innocent, trusting way about her, those gorgeous legs.

It was dumb maybe, but he was there, and Hallie was there, and all the plans for the party were going smoothly, so they had sneaked up to his office.

Ralph, in the throes of passion, didn't notice that Hallie was being careful not to mess up her makeup or nails, or that his skin was sticking to the Naugahyde, but the familiar, demanding rapping on the office door sent him careening off the couch like a shot.

"It's Ruth," he hissed, panic-stricken. "I know her knock."

He fumbled for his glasses, then grabbed his clothes and threw them on. "Oh, God, she's

early. Ruth's never early for parties. Hide, quick!"

Hallie dived under the desk. "What are you doing in here?" Ruth asked suspiciously when he finally answered the door.

Ralph tried not to look guilty as he fumbled with his cuffs. "Sorry. I was in the john. I wanted to make sure I looked okay."

He could tell Ruth wasn't terribly satisfied with that answer, but she had seemed about to let it ride for the moment when Ralph felt something pulling at his shoe.

He made the mistake of looking down, which made Ruth look down, too. And what they both saw was five magenta fingernails tugging at a pair of lacy lavender panties under Ralph's heel.

Ruth didn't say anything right away, and Ralph knew that was a bad sign. Ruth always had something to say. Instead, her face turned to steel.

"After all I've done for you, you humiliate me like this?"

Ralph tried to think what she'd done for him, but realized quickly that wasn't the point.

"You bring some tramp here, into your office, in front of my friends! My whole bridge group is here! You're a dead man, Ralph Schwartz!"

With that, she stormed out.

Ralph stood silent, blood drained from his face, listening

to her footsteps thudding angrily down the stairs, then ran to his desk and began ripping open Di-Gel packets.

He dropped heavily into his chair and had begun to pull it up to his desk when he heard a muffled "ouch" and realized Hallie was still there.

"Can I come out now?" she whispered up to him.

"Sorry, sweetie. Sure, let me help you."

While Hallie got dressed, Ralph slumped at the desk, his chin in his hands. His mind was reeling. Should he ask Ruth for a divorce? Or just slit his wrists?

Later, after Hallie left, Ralph had forced himself down the stairs to the party. Avoiding Ruth was easy. She stayed on the other side of the room mostly, and left early. He hung around until even the cleaning lady had gone, then went dejectedly up to his office and poured himself a stiff drink. And another. And another. Until he knew he'd better spend the night on the couch.

He dragged a blanket out of the little closet, settled it around him, and pulled it over his head. It was nice the way the couch still smelled of Hallie's perfume and everything. He finally dropped off to nightmare-ridden sleep and awakened abruptly at six A.M., with the sudden thought that Ruth had probably left the party early to

do something to him.

He lay there for a while, thinking about what it might be. She did have a big mean streak. Give all his new clothes to Goodwill? Nah. Buy one of those little dogs he hated so much? No. And then it occurred to him: the money. She'd take all the money and make him beg for an allowance for the rest of his life.

He went into the bathroom and tried to get rid of some of the hung over, rumpled look he had acquired during the night, then set out for the bank.

Suddenly, the rumbling and shaking stopped, and the street was totally, utterly silent. Ralph peered out. There were people out there stumbling around in the debris, dripping blood and loose pieces of plaster.

Ralph thought about leaving the safety of his shelter, then decided to wait until some other people tried it first.

An older woman with thick glasses bouncing off her bosom on a long chain emerged from the building, trailing two cringing young male assistants, and shoved her way through the crowd.

"We must find those confidential papers," she shrieked into the silence. "Mr. McAllister will just have a fit once he finds out they've turned up missing."

Ralph, being from New York and unfamiliar with the phrase, was mulling over how something could turn up and be missing at the same time when the three of them began to sift desperately through the rubble.

Just then he heard a whistling sound and looked up. A gargoyle with a horribly feral grin landed near his feet and glared up at him evilly. The face reminded him of Ruth's; it sent a chill up and down his spine.

Ralph was terrified. Would a building collapse on him if he tried to get home now? Some of them looked a little wobbly. Could Ruth have, by some act of a benevolent God, been killed, or at least knocked on the head enough to have permanent amnesia?

Probably none of the above, he finally decided. Ruth was most likely on the phone, siccing vicious lawyers on him. He knew he had to face the music sooner or later, so he tentatively stuck one foot out into the shifting mounds of New York skyline that now covered the street.

The particular mound he stepped on shifted a little bit, then held. He took another step, and another, and finally got the hang of it. He stumbled only occasionally after a while, and had only one real spill when he tried to jump from a mound of

debris on 47th Street, near the construction site. There were crowds of people on the street now that it was over, surveying the damage to their autos, helping the wounded, trying to clear paths for emergency workers who were arriving.

Ralph ignored them all, his only thought being to get home to Ruth before she had a chance to do something really dreadful to him.

He stopped around the corner from his building to catch his breath, and to say a fervent prayer that he would find empty skyline where his apartment had been, but unfortunately, it was still there.

His pace slowed as he entered the lobby, his heart beating wildly. He was terrified. The lobby was dark and deserted, and strange echoes were emanating from the shaft of the elevator. He pressed the call button . . . and got nothing.

Ruth was in the kitchen rearranging the pots and pans that were strewn across the floor from the earthquake when Ralph arrived, breathless from climbing the stairs and bedraggled from his adventures. The look in her eyes told him that discussion was out of the question, and she didn't care whether he was seriously injured unless it made him die. Preferably soon.

He had an unusually vivid premonition that the next thing he would be wearing was cutlery. He was right.

Hell hath no fury like a woman scorned, nor any weapon more dangerous than a carving knife from a dishwasher that hasn't been run in a couple of weeks.

When Ruth came at him with the knife, Ralph ran for his life. The two of them circled each other around the living room couch until they were wheezing like sick ducks. Finally Ruth seemed to give in. She lowered the knife and started to say something, but Ralph's glasses were fogged with sweat, and all he saw was a chance at freedom. Before he knew what he was doing, the knife was on the floor and his pudgy, sausage-like little fingers were around her neck.

Ralph went to the bathroom and puked, then slunk greyly to the kitchen, trying not to look at Ruth's lifeless body as he passed the living room. It was strange—maybe it was all the booze and salty hors d'oeuvres he had consumed the night before—but he was starving.

What he really wanted was a toasted bagel with globs of warm cream cheese and slices of fresh lox, but since he couldn't find any of those three items,

and there wasn't any electricity to make even plain white toast with, he settled for a stale bran muffin with butter.

As the food settled uncertainly in his stomach, he realized he was in serious trouble. What was he going to do with her body?

And then it came to him: he could bury her under some rubble somewhere and people would think she'd gotten killed in the earthquake.

It was a great idea while it lasted, which wasn't long. When he went back to the living room to make sure she was totally, absolutely, irrevocably dead, he saw that his fingerprints were developing on her neck like Polaroids. He was going to have to make sure her body never turned up.

He thought about it for a minute. With the accounts cleaned out, he could say she must have decided to leave him. That would be even better. He wouldn't be able to divorce her, and it would take years before he could have her declared dead, so he'd really be a free man. If he played it right, he could get a lot of sympathy from women out of this number. Yeah, this was terrific. But he had to ditch her body somewhere. And in a hurry.

He dragged an old rug out of the den, wrapped her up in it, and bound it with twine. Look-

ing very much like one of the seven dwarves, he heaved the rolled-up rug over his shoulder and made his way cautiously down the darkened stairwell of his building out into the deceptively peaceful-looking city. The East River was only two blocks away.

After about a block and a half, Ralph felt as if his heart was going to explode from the strain, but he kept on. He could see and smell the river, which seemed to be about three feet below its normally repugnant low tide. Glop-covered things were protruding from the choppy, churning depths.

Ralph paused to rest for a while at the railing, balancing his heavy burden on the edge—and waiting to see if anyone was watching him. When he was sure the coast was clear, he let the rug slide, little by little, over the edge. It hung burpily in the water for a few seconds, then began to sink.

Ralph chortled as it disappeared from sight and turned for home, a satisfied grin on his face. He hadn't gotten far when he heard a voice scream from somewhere high above him, "Watch out, mister! It's a tidal wave, and it's coming after you!"

Ralph looked up, saw a toothless old crone in a housedress leaning out a window, then turned around. The smile faded from his lips as he saw a great

wall of water rushing at him. He barely had time for one deep breath before he was engulfed in malodorous, slimy wetness. He felt a heavy thud against the back of his head, and he was out for the count.

When he awoke, he was lying face down in a muddy pile of rubble, with water surging bare inches below him. He choked and gasped and spit and wished he had a handkerchief on him for the stuff that had gotten up his nose.

He was soaking wet, and cold, and really mad. Like people who trip on the sidewalk, the first thing he did was get up and look around for what had hit him. There, lying right behind him, leeringly, was ... The Rug.

Ralph sat and cried—blubbered, actually—until he realized it wasn't going to do him any good, then got up and checked to see if he was okay. He was in some pain but figured if he'd actually broken something it would hurt a lot worse.

With a disgusted sigh, he got himself on firm but squishy footing, and heaved the rug, which was now soaked through and about fifty pounds heavier, back over his shoulder.

He couldn't leave it there after that ... person had seen him heave it over the railing.

Okay. On to Plan B, Ralph

thought to himself as he stumbled through the rubble, whatever that is.

"Excuse me, mister," a pipsqueaky voice said somewhere below and behind his right shoulder. He turned abruptly at the sound. Five kids in badge-covered Boy Scout uniforms took one step back in unison and ducked, as though they had practiced it. The kid in the front of the line—the one who had spoken—held his hands over his cap as the dripping mass of rug came toward him.

Ralph saw a freckle-faced, bespectacled chubbette with mounds of metal protruding from his teeth. Ralph hated braces.

"Yeah?" he answered grumpily.

"We're trying to be helpful and stuff so we can earn some badges. Want us to carry your rug?"

"No!" Ralph shouted, startling the boys, who backed up another step uneasily.

Ralph thought about it for a minute. "Well, maybe it's not such a bad idea, after all. I've only got a block to go."

He lowered the rug onto four anxious shoulders, and led the way back to his building.

"Where were you going with the rug, mister?" asked a runty kid who was trailing behind the four eager beavers. Ralph noticed then that his arm was in

a sling, and that he was peering intently inside the rug as he walked.

"Uh, I was, uh . . . taking it to the cleaners. Yeah, taking it to the cleaners."

"I lived here since I was a kid. I don't know any cleaners in this neighborhood."

"Well . . . it's a new one. Maybe you haven't seen it yet."

"What's inside the rug?"

"There's nothing inside it," Ralph said hastily. "What makes you think there's something inside it?"

"I can see it," he said, pointing. "It looks like you accidentally put a shoe in there."

"Oh. Maybe that happened when it got wet."

"Yeah, maybe," he said, looking up at Ralph suspiciously.

"Well, this is my building," Ralph said nervously. "You can set it down right here. I can get it the rest of the way."

"You can't take it inside. I heard they got gas leaks in this building," the bespectacled kid said after he'd set his end down and peered at the scummy stains on what had been a clean uniform.

"Yeah," another boy said. "What are you going to do with it?"

"I don't know yet," Ralph said through gritted teeth.

"We could take it all the way to the cleaners for you," he said hopefully.

"That won't be necessary. It probably won't be open now."

"Yeah. You're prolly right."

"Hey, mister? Could you give us a letter so we could show it to our scoutmaster?"

"You mean, right now?"

"Yeah. We have paper and everything."

Ralph thought for a minute.

"Well, I'd like to write something especially nice, and that might take some time. Why don't you give me your names. I'll have my secretary type it up real professional and send it."

The kid with the braces looked skeptical. "You're not trying to worm out of writing the letter after we carried this nasty rug around, are you, mister?"

"No, of course not." Just then, Ralph noticed that the kid with the sling was scrunched down by the rug, and had stuck his good arm all the way inside it.

"What are you doing there?" he screamed.

The boy inched his way out and stood up. "I thought you might want your shoe back," he said, offering it to Ralph. "It felt like there was something else in there, too, but I couldn't reach it."

"Thanks, kid." Ralph held out his hand authoritatively, and turned to the other boy. "Gimme your names. I gotta be going."

The kid reluctantly wrote down the names of the five boys

and an address, and forked the piece of notepaper over.

Ralph hung around tapping his foot until he was sure they had all left, then tossed the shoe as far away from him as he could.

Finally, the tension of all he had been through flooded over him, and he sat on the rug, his head in his hands, and wept.

"Hey, here's one," he heard someone say nearby. He realized he was sitting on a wet rug, on a dead body, on a pile of rubble, on a main thoroughfare, with dead river scum in his hair, and tried hurriedly to wipe the tears off his face.

He felt a shadow looming over him and looked up. A cop in a bedraggled uniform was eyeing him critically. Next to him was a young bearded man with a medical kit in his hand.

"Go away. Get away from me," Ralph sobbed before he could catch himself.

"It's all right," the bearded man was saying, enunciating carefully as though Ralph were deaf or retarded. "You've been in an earthquake. It's normal for people to experience shock and trauma, especially if they've been injured. Just stick out your leg, and let me take a look at it."

The cop was still looming above him . . . ominously? Ralph wondered.

The doctor scissored Ralph's

pants leg open and gasped. His leg was cut in several places, and it looked awful, mostly because of the slime hanging from it.

"We've got to get this man to the airlift platform. This could be a serious wound, especially if it becomes infected."

"Oh, no. You're not taking me anywhere!" Ralph screamed. "I'm staying right here."

The cop sighed and reached down to grab Ralph by the arm-pits and hoist him to his feet. Ralph kicked out at him, tentatively, not sure how much trouble that might get him into, under the circumstances, or how much it might hurt—which was a lot. His leg was starting to swell up a little.

Ralph tried to sound reasonable. "Look, there are lots worse hurt people all over the place. Just stick a bandage on it. I live right around here. I'll be fine."

They debated between themselves for a few minutes, as though he weren't there. Finally the doctor sighed and opened his bag. Ralph didn't even squeak when he put the bubbly stuff that hurt on his open gashes, just to make sure they'd go away when they were done.

Meanwhile, Hallie was dangling in midair over the East River, as she had been ever

since the earthquake had started. She had been on the Roosevelt Island tram, her suitcase packed, under the mistaken impression that Ralph had been mumbling about running away with her, instead of doing away with himself, the previous day.

The tram had shaken and trembled and swayed, but had held its ground. The problem was, all the shaking had done something to the inner workings of the machinery, and besides, power was off all over the city, so the car was stuck where it was.

There weren't too many parts of Ralph's body that didn't hurt at the moment. As the sun set over New Jersey, he realized that he wasn't going to be able to take Ruth anywhere. In fact, his shoulders were so sore he could barely pick up the rug.

He let himself into the apartment building's subterranean garage, dragging Ruth behind him. Fortunately, there was little damage here. He dug the car keys out of his pocket, unlocked the trunk, and hoisted. He pulled. He pushed. He jiggled.

Finally, he scrunched his eyes closed, gritted his teeth, and stuck one hand up inside the rug to see what was wrong. Ruth's knees were aimed the wrong way. He turned her over and slammed the lid on her.

"Good night, Irene," he mumbled to himself.

When he was done, he crawled into the front seat to take a nap. He was hungry and smelly, but he didn't care.

He awoke to the sound of an ominous rumble somewhere. It was his stomach. He didn't care about the gas leaks any more. Or his hurt leg. Or whether any of Uncle Ralphie's Rebuilt Appliances Stores were still standing. Life had boiled down to one main objective—getting to the chocolate cake he knew was in the refrigerator of apartment 5A.

He tiptoed up the stairs, let himself into the apartment, and sucked in food. There still wasn't any electricity, and the apartment smelled stale and dead.

Fortified, Ralph sneaked a peek out the front window to see how the city looked, and was surprised to find the dogooder block association out front cleaning and bagging up rubble. They had made a pretty good dent—black garbage bags were lined up like bunkers out front. Unfortunately, the faster the city got back to normal, the less time he had to get rid of Ruth.

He decided to find a grocery cart, load the rug on, and go for a walk until he found a good spot to drop it. Like maybe that little park a few blocks away. Or a deserted subway station.

Ralph cleaned up as best he could and changed into some fresh clothes. By ten o'clock he had done the dastardly deed—Ruth, who might or might not have gone in head first, was safely deposited in a narrow, deserted alley in a rickety shopping cart, where, he hoped, she wouldn't be found for a long time.

He went back to the apartment and took a nap.

Around three o'clock, the TV came on full blast. The refrigerator grumbled into coldness. Ralph woke up, his heart beating wildly in his chest. While he was eating some fairly rotten roast beef, the doorbell rang. He tiptoed over and turned the knob cautiously.

It was Hallie. She looked bedraggled.

"What are you doing here?" he whispered furiously, reaching for her collar to pull her into the apartment before Mrs. Skutowski across the hall saw her.

Hallie resisted, digging the pointy heels of her shoes into the floor and holding on to the sides of the door.

Ralph won.

"Is Ruth here?" she whispered, her eyes darting around the room.

"Uh, no," Ralph said, letting go of her and clearing his throat nervously.

Now that she knew it was safe, she threw herself hyster-

ically into Ralph's arms. "Oh, Ralph, I was so scared. I got stuck on the Roosevelt Island tram during the earthquake," Hallie sobbed, "and I just got off. I'm ready to run away, whenever you are. Oh, Ralph, I was so worried about you. Are you all right?"

She clutched him hormonally, leaving little stab marks with her fingernails.

"I'm okay," he said gruffly, trying to back away.

"Ralph, can we go now, before Ruth comes back? I didn't like the way she yelled at you," Hallie said, looking balefully into his eyes.

"We can't go anywhere—they said on the TV there's no way out of the city. It's okay, though—you can stay here with me," he said, without thinking.

"But when's Ruth coming back?"

"She's not."

"Did she decide to give you a divorce?"

"Not exactly, sweetie. Come on in and take your coat off, and I'll tell you all about it."

"I left my suitcase outside. Will you help me bring it in?"

"Sure."

Hallie turned and opened the door, and Ralph suddenly heard a suspiciously familiar squeaking sound. Hairs rose on the back of his neck as she wheeled in The Shopping Cart and tried to lift her suitcase out of it.

"What in hell is that?" he boomed.

"Oh, honey," Hallie said. "I was just wandering along, dragging my heavy suitcase, when this shopping cart rolled out of an alley. It was like a present from heaven. I tried to get the rug out, but it wouldn't come. I didn't want to touch it too much because it smells. We can just throw the cart outside, okay?"

With that, she pulled it all the way into the living room; with the rug hanging precariously over the side. Ralph felt his blood pressure begin to swirl around his head like a tornado, and clenched his fists at his side.

"You bimbo. You dumb bunny." He paused to shut the door behind her so the neighbors wouldn't hear.

Hallie pouted. "What's the matter, honey?"

Ralph realized he had maybe gone too far. After all, Hallie didn't know what she had done. Yet.

"Nothing. I'm sorry." Ralph tried to give her his best cheesy grin. "Want some food?"

They ate, and then Ralph explained The Way Things Were—a sort of edited version, where Ruth mostly accidentally croaked.

"Did she always smell like that?" Hallie asked hesitantly when Ralph was done, wrin-

kling her nose at the carpet-encased body.

"Of course not," Ralph said. "That's just . . . oh, forget it. The point is, we've got to get her body out of here — somewhere where it'll never be found. But first we've got to get it back down to the trunk of the car, so we can breathe in here."

The shopping cart was too squeaky, so they carried her by hand. When they were done, Hallie cheered him up, the way she usually did. Only it wasn't very exciting, what with the smell of the fishy carpet pervading the apartment. Ralph fell asleep the minute they were done.

Early the next morning, just before dawn, Ralph was awakened by the familiar sound of an immense garbage truck wheezing and choking on trash. It gave him an idea.

He raced down to the car, opened the trunk, and tried to get Ruth's body out. It was stuck. Rigor mortis had set in.

He slammed the trunk lid shut and went back to bed.

"Phew!" Hallie said, her eyes trying desperately to focus. "You stink."

Ralph showered and dressed, and finally shook Hallie awake.

"We're getting out of this city. I can't stand it any more."

They set out for the 59th Street bridge in the Mercedes

with Hallie's suitcase, Ralph's clothes, Ruth's body, and the briefcase from the safe deposit heist. The way Ralph figured it, if a garbage truck could get through, anything could.

But once again, he was wrong.

A hand-painted sign at the bridge entrance said, "Essential Commercial Traffic Only." Ralph was about to make a run for it anyway when he heard tapping on the window. He saw a white glove, the sleeve of a blue uniform, and a belt buckle. The officer encased in it was large. "Bridge is closed to vehicular traffic," he said, pointing at the sign.

"Why is that?" Ralph asked, as politely as he could.

"You look a lot like Uncle Ralphie," the officer said.

"He is," Hallie said proudly, before Ralph had a chance to answer for himself.

"Oh. Neat. Uh, they got some structural damage. They're working on it night and day, but they're taking it easy on the weight levels. Only food and supply vehicles are allowed to cross."

"Oh. I guess I'd better turn around, then. Are any of the other bridges open to regular traffic?"

"A couple, but you can't get to them from here. Earthquake knocked out some of the streets. Hunner-twenny-fith Street is under water—that's where the

earthquake started. And down at 14th Street, too. It's sunk, and there's a big hole in the street about three feet wide."

"Oh. Okay. Thanks."

"Sorry, Uncle Ralphie. Wisht I could help you out."

Ralph waved a hand. "It's all right. No problem."

Over a quiet dinner of canned tuna that tasted like cat food, Ralph and Hallie tried to think up places they could unload Ruth's body. By midnight they had two almost sure winners—Central Park, provided it wasn't still full of people made homeless by the earthquake, and the Columbus Circle subway station, where they could put her in a phone booth and she wouldn't be noticed for days.

"Let's go," Ralph finally said, picking up his trenchcoat.

"Aw, Ralphie, do we have to do it tonight? I'm really tired," Hallie whined. "I need my beauty sleep."

"Yeah, we gotta do it tonight. Do you want to end up in prison or something?" Ralph asked.

Hallie stared at him blankly.

"They don't allow blow dryers in prison—or fingernail polish," he said harshly.

Hallie jumped from her chair, her eyes wide. "Are you sure?"

"Positive. I seen a documentary on it once. No makeup! Besides, you gotta do a lot of hard work—cleaning dishes all

day, scrubbing floors. It's awful."

But when they got to the garage, the car wasn't there.

"Are you sure you parked it on this level?" Hallie asked. "All the spaces look alike."

"There's only one space per apartment," he said patiently. "See how this says five with an A? That means it's my space. See how there's glass all over the ground here?" he added. "That means somebody probly broke into the window to get into the car. Got it?"

Hallie nodded. "Now what do we do?"

"I haven't figured that out yet. Do you mind?"

"No, sweetie. You just take your time."

"Thank you."

Ralph was relieved for a few minutes, and then panic set in. When they got back to the apartment, he paced. He chewed Di-Gel viciously. He slanted vaguely threatening glances in Hallie's direction. Should he report the car missing? Should he report Ruth missing? Could he trust Hallie not to say anything stupid? What would the car thieves do when they found Ruth parked in the trunk?

Hallie, meanwhile, bit her fingernails and tried to look invisible. She could tell Ralph was worried.

It suddenly dawned on Ralph that what was really wrong was

that he missed Ruth. As awful as she had been to him, at least she knew how to make a decision when one needed to be made. Even worse, his hormones had taken a hike, and he wasn't sure he even liked Hallie any more.

The phone rang. Ralph jumped and raced for it, then skidded to a stop with his hand on the receiver. Too late. He'd already picked it up.

"This is Detective Gibbons from Homicide," the voice on the other end of the line said. "Is this Ralph Schwartz?"

"Yes?" Ralph said tentatively, his heart beating wildly.

"You own a blue Mercedes?" He read off the license plate number.

"Uh, yeah, I do."

"I hate to do this over the phone, but with the quake and all, we're short of men. We've found your car. I'm sorry, but your wife was in it. She's been murdered. We have two suspects in custody right now. We found them in the car with the body, trying to dump it off 125th Street. Could you come down and give us a statement?"

Ralph chortled.

"Pardon?" Gibbons said.

He cleared his throat. "I'm sorry. I just got choked up."

"Oh. Well. Could you come right down? We'd like to process the perps. It's getting a little crowded in here."

"Sure. No problem."

Ralph hung up the phone and laughed—deep, belly-racking guffaws.

Hallie looked up, her eyes wide, from where she had been doing major surgery on a chipped nail. "What's so funny?"

"The police have found the car, with Ruth's body in it. They think the guys who stole the car killed her. It's too good to be true. I'm free, at last."

There was something about the way he said that that made Hallie feel squeamish.

He sobered. "I have to go down to the station to make a statement."

"Can I go with you?"

"No," he said, his eyes popping. "You have to stay here. What I mean is, it wouldn't be a good idea for the cops to know about you. I mean . . . well, you know."

Hallie gave him a sad, puppy-dog look. "Sure, Ralph," she said quietly. "Whatever you say. Do you still love me?"

"Of course I do, sweetie. We just have to be discreet for a little while longer. Okay?"

"Okay." She was pouting again.

Ralph hurried down to the station, made his statement, and headed back, somewhat reluctantly now, to Hallie.

It was over. Those two slimy car stealers were going up the river.

A long arm reached out from an alley and pulled him in. He smelled garlic and sweat in the thick darkness, and felt something sharp pressing against his shirt. He sucked in his gut.

"Joo should be ashamed of jourself, man—joo keeled jour wife," a voice said accusingly. His eyes adjusted to the dimness of his surroundings and he looked into a pimply, brown-eyed face.

Ralph shook his head violently. "No," he squeaked, pointing in the direction of the stationhouse whence he had come.

"Jeah, and joo are sending some rilly good fren's of mine to preeson for a crime joo committed. I cannot, in good conscience, allow joo to breathe the same foul air of thees ceety as they do for moch longer."

Before Ralph had a chance to worm his way out of the man's

grip, the alley, or the frameup, the knife had disappeared into his shirt, and his assailant was gone.

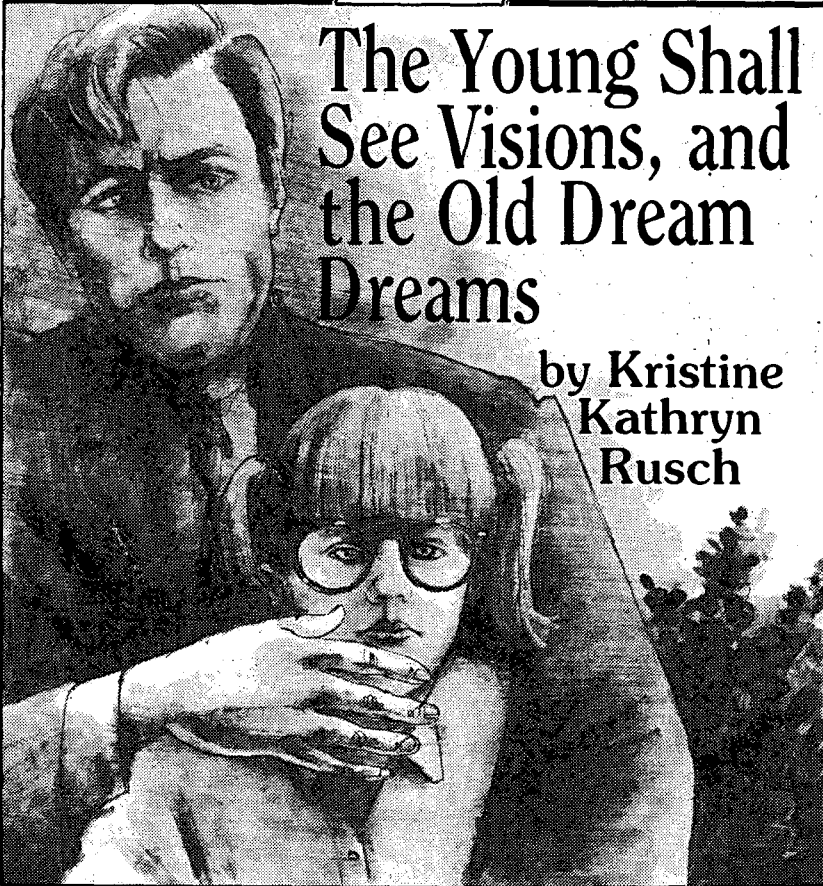
Ralph lay there, gasping for breath, trying to remember what organs were near where the knife was and keep blood from pouring out at the same time.

It was a losing battle.

As the world dimmed around him, he saw a foot tapping nearby. He focused on it, tried to form the word *help*, but he couldn't get it out.

As he stared, the tapping foot was joined by a leg, and a bit of skirt, and then an entire body began to coalesce before him. It looked familiar. A mean-looking pair of eyes peered out from beneath slime-covered hair.

"Could you hurry it up, Ralph?" Ruth's cadaverous form shrilled at him. "Can't you do anything right?"



The Young Shall See Visions, and the Old Dream Dreams

by Kristine
Kathryn
Rusch

Nell rubs a hand on her knickers and grips the bat tightly. Her topknot is coming loose. She can see strands of hair hanging in front of the wire frames of her glasses.

"What's the matter, four-eyes? You nervous?"

She concentrates on the ball Pete holds in his right hand instead of the boys scattered across the dusty back lot. Any minute now, he'll pitch, and if she thinks about the ball instead of the names, she'll hit it.

"You hold that bat like a girl," TJ says from first base.

Nell keeps staring at the ball. She can see the stitches running

along its face, the dirty surface disappearing into Pete's fist. "That's because I am a girl," she says. It doesn't matter if TJ hears her. All that matters is that she spoke.

"Pitch already!" Chucky yells from the grassy sideline.

Pete spits and Nell grimaces. She hates it when he spits. With a sharp snap of the wrist, he releases the ball. It curves toward her. She jumps out of its way and swings at the same time. The ball hits the skinny part of the bat, close to her fingers, and bounces forward.

"Ruuun!" Chucky screams.

She drops the bat and takes off, the air caught in her throat. She's not good at running; someone always tags her before she gets to base. But the sweater-wrapped rock that is first base is getting closer and still she can't hear anyone running behind her. She leaps the last few inches and lands in the middle of the rock, leaving a large footprint in the wool. A few seconds later, the ball slams into TJ's palm.

"You didn't have to move," TJ says. "The ball was gonna hit you anyway."

"Pete always does that so that I can't swing." Nell tugs on her ripped, high-buttoned blouse. "He knows I hit better than any of you guys, so he cheats. And besides, the last time he did that I was bruised for a week. Papa wasn't gonna let me play any more."

TJ shrugs, his attention already on the next batter.

"Nell?"

She looks up. Edmund is standing behind third base. His three-piece suit is dusty and he looks tired. "Jeez," she says under her breath.

"What?" TJ asks.

"Nothing," she says. "I gotta go."

"Why? The game's not over."

"I know." She pushes a strand of hair out of her face. "But I gotta go anyway."

She walks across the field in front of the pitcher's mound. Pete spits and barely misses her shoe. She stops and slowly looks up at him in a conscious imitation of her father's most frightening look.

"Whatcha think you're doing?" he asks.

"Leaving." Her glasses have slid to the edge of her nose, but she doesn't push them back. Touching them would remind him that she can't see very well.

"Can't. You're on first."

"Chucky can take my place."

"Can't neither. He's gotta bat soon."

She glances at Chucky. He's too far away to hear anything. "I can't do anything about it, Pete. I gotta go."

Pete tugs his cap over his eyes and squints at her. "Then you can't play with us no more. It was dumb to let a girl play in the first place."

"It is not dumb! And you've gone home in the middle of a game before." She hates Pete. Someday she'll show him that a girl can be just as good as a boy, even at baseball.

"Nell." Edmund sounds weary. "Let's go."

"He's not your pa," Pete says. "How come you gotta go with him?"

"He's my sister's boyfriend." She pushes her glasses up with her knuckle and trudges the rest of the way across the yard. When she reaches Edmund, he takes her arm and they start walking.

"Why do you play with them?" he asks softly. "Baseball isn't a game for young ladies."

He always asks her that, and once he yelled at her for wearing the knickers that Karl had given her. "I don't like playing dollies with Louisa."

"I don't suppose I'd like that much either," he says. When they get far enough away from the field, he stops and turns her to him. There are deep shadows under his eyes and his face looks pinched. "I'm not going to take you all the way home. I just came because I promised I would."

"You're not gonna see Bess?"

He shakes his head, then reaches into his pocket and pulls out the slender ring that cost him three months' wages. The diamond glitters in the sunlight. "Karl's back," he says.

Nell traced the nameplate. Karl Krupp. She hadn't imagined it; the name didn't disappear under her touch like so many other things did. Her fingers, with their swollen knuckles and fragile bones, looked defenseless beside that name. Slowly she let her hand fall back onto the cold metal rim of her walker. He would be how old now? When she had been ten, he had been twenty-five—a fifteen-year difference that would now make him . . . ninety-five. She glanced at the door to his room. It hadn't been open since he arrived, and that frustrated her. She wanted to see how badly age had changed him.

She supposed it hadn't changed him much, since he was in House-

hold 5. The other residents were reasonably intelligent and ambulatory—except for Sophronia. But the nurses had removed her as soon as her senility became evident. Nell's own memory lapses and growing tendency to daydream worried her. She wasn't sure how much provocation the nurses needed before they moved her to a more restrictive household.

Nell lifted her walker and moved away from the door. She didn't want Karl to catch her snooping. Her name was different and she certainly didn't look like the scrawny tomboy he had known, but she didn't want him to know that she was watching him until she knew exactly what she was going to do.

Karl slouches indolently in the settee. His long legs stretch out before him and cross at the ankles, his left arm is draped across the armrest, and his finely chiseled head rests against the upholstered back. He should not be comfortable, but he clearly is.

Bess sits in the armchair across from him, leaning forward. Wisps of hair frame her flushed face, her eyes sparkle, and her hands—looking naked without Edmund's ring—nervously toy with her best skirt.

Nell lets the door swing shut. Karl doesn't turn at the click, but instead says in his deep, rich baritone, "Is that my Nell?"

She freezes, not expecting the well of emotion that voice raises in her. She imagines herself running to him and burying her face in his neck, then pulling back and slapping him with all her strength.

"Nelly, it's Karl." Bess can't quite keep the happiness from her voice.

"I know," she says, flicking dried mud off her thumb. She is covered with sweat, her glasses are dirty, and her topknot is coming loose. She probably doesn't even look like a little girl.

"Nelly . . ."

She hates the nickname almost as much as she hates Bess's tone. "I'm gonna go wash up."

"Go around front so you don't get mud on the floor."

Nell suppresses a sigh and turns around to let herself out. Just then her father opens the door, bringing with him the scents of tobacco and hair tonic. He ignores his youngest daughter's appearance and starts to go into the parlor.

"Who owns the fancy Model-T? Is it yours, Edm—?"

He stops just inside the parlor and Nell takes a step forward so that she can see everything. Karl rises quickly and extends his hand. Bess is biting her lower lip, and Papa has flushed a deep scarlet.

"I told you," he says in his lowest, angriest voice, "never to cross my threshold again."

"Mr. Richter, things have changed."

"I don't care if you've become the richest man in the world. You are not welcome here." Papa's voice grows even softer. "Now get out."

"Sir, please—"

"Get. Out. Or must I escort you?"

With one swift, graceful movement, Karl sweeps his hat off the table and places it jauntily on his head. He nods at Bess, steps around Papa, and musses Nell's hair as he goes out the door.

Papa doesn't move until he hears the automobile crank up. Then he says tightly to Bess, "You know he's not allowed to be here."

"But he's different. He's got a new job in Milwaukee, and he's got *prospects*, Papa."

"Fine. Let him find another girl."

Nell leans back against the door. They have forgotten that she's there.

"Papa." Bess rises out of the armchair. In her high-buttoned shoes, she is almost as tall as her father. "Things are better. He promised."

"Oh? Did he promise he would never hit you again, or did he just talk about money?"

Bess whirls away and looks out the window. "Papa, that's not fair."

"No, it's not fair." Papa pulls his watch from his pocket, opens it, and then closes it without looking at the face. "But I don't want him back. After he hit you, I heard Nelly crying herself to sleep every single night."

Nell's face grows warm. She thought no one knew.

Papa stuffs his watch back into his pocket and adjusts his waistcoat. "Now, I would like some dinner."

Nell slips out the front door and heads around the house to the pump. Her body is shaking. She remembers Bess's swollen and bruised face, but she also remembers the fun they had laughing on the front porch with Karl. Her tears those nights hadn't been just for Bess. They had also been for those summer afternoons filled with laughter, lemonade, and Karl mussing her hair.

Even though it was difficult, Nell liked to walk. She felt that each slow step added a minute to her life. Without her walker, she would have to use a wheelchair—and the wheelchair was a sign of weakness. Lifting the walker and then taking a step gave her the same sure feel that she used to have after hitting a home run the way Karl had taught her to.

Sometimes she spent the entire day walking up and down the hallways. She got to go outside on those rare occasions when her family visited. They took her out so that they could avoid talking.

Each household was painted a different color. The walls in Household 5 were robin's egg blue and covered with artwork done by the residents. Shortly after Karl arrived, a painting of a multi-colored spiral had gone up beside his door.

Nell found her gaze drawn to the painting. She pushed her glasses up so that she could study it. The spiral had rungs, like a ladder. At the bottom, instead of a signature, was a notation that tugged at a memory she couldn't reach: deoxyribose nucleic acid. She read the phrase twice, then saw with a start that Karl's door was open. Strains of a Chopin étude slipped into the hallway. Intrigued, she leaned closer.

The residents were encouraged to fill their rooms with their personal effects. Most rooms had a television set, a stuffed armchair covered with a quilt, and a cross on prominent display. But Karl's room was lined with bookcases, and the bookcases were full. Karl stood near the door, holding a book in his hand.

"It's the pretty woman from across the hall." His voice hadn't changed. It was still rich and full, and it still sent shivers down her back. His black hair had become silver and his skin was covered with delicately etched lines. Age hadn't bent him. He extended his hand. His movements were as graceful as ever. "Would you care to come and visit for a moment?"

Nell found herself staring at his hand. The last time she had seen it, it had been covered with blood. "No, thank you," she said. "I'm taking my walk."

"Surely you have just a moment—?" He inclined his head toward her, waiting for her to give him her name.

"Eleanor," she said.

"Eleanor?" He took a step back so that she could pass him. She hesitated, then smiled a little bit at herself, realizing that this was the man who had given her a taste for charm.

"A moment." She turned her walker and started toward him, feeling awkward for the first time in years.

He watched her shuffling movements. "Arthritis?"

She shook her head. "I broke both hips pinch-hitting for some Little Leaguers in 1975. The doctors said I'd never walk again."

"Did you win?"

She looked up at him, startled to find herself only a foot away. "I'm walking, aren't I?"

He chuckled. "No, no. The game."

"Oh." She pushed the walker through the doorway. Bookcases made the entrance narrow. His room smelled like ink and old books. "We lost by three runs."

"It's a shame," he said quietly. "You should always win your last game."

She stopped near the window. He had a view of the back parking lot. "Who says it was my last game?"

She turned and looked at his room, then. It was filled with books. A desk covered with papers stood in the center of the floor and a stereo, like the one her granddaughter was so proud of, took up a shelf of one of the bookcases. The bed in the far corner was neatly made and covered with a manufactured spread.

"Would you like to sit?" He pulled a chair back for her. Nell shook her head.

"Tea then?" He reached behind him and plugged in a coffee machine. Cups, canisters, and vials filled with liquid rested beside the machine.

"What are you doing here?" Nell's question slipped out. He turned sharply to look at her. Nell felt herself blush. "I mean, you don't look as if you need to be here."

He smiled and the lines cascaded into wrinkles. "My grand-nephew runs this place. He figures I'm getting too old to live alone."

"But there are other places to stay if you're in good health. You don't seem to need medical care."

"I don't yet." He hooked his thumb in his front pockets and leaned against the door frame. Nell wondered if he'd stop her if she tried to leave. "I'm helping him with some research."

Nell glanced again at the desk. Some of the papers lying there were covered with the same spiral that was near the door.

"We're trying to find a way to slow down the aging process," he said. "You've heard of Leonard Hayflick?"

"No."

"Hayflick is a biologist who found that cells have a clearly defined life span. He figured that the life span was determined by the

number of cell divisions instead of chronological age. But some cells deteriorate before they reach their maximum divisions. And that, some believe, causes aging. Follow me?"

Nell realized she had been staring at him blankly. "Sorry."

"Let me put it simply," he said. "Everyone can live to a certain maximum age, but not everyone reaches that age because of physical deterioration. What we're trying to do is prevent that physical deterioration so that people can live out their entire lives."

"What is this maximum age?" Nell asked.

Karl shrugged. "We don't know. But some people have claimed that they were well over a hundred. And I just read about a woman recently whose baptismal records prove she is a hundred and twenty."

"Why are you telling me?"

"You asked, Nelly."

Nell's entire body went cold. She gripped her walker tightly and tried to think of a way she could get out of the room.

He took a step toward her, and she cringed.

"I'm sorry," he said softly. "I should have let you know right away that I knew who you were. My family stayed in Wisconsin, Nell. They let me know what was going on in your life. I knew you were here well before I came."

"What are you going to do?" Her voice trembled.

He took another cautious step toward her. "Well, first, Nelly, I'd like to explain about Bess."

"No," she said and her fear was as real as it had been that sunlit July morning when he had clamped his bloody hand against her mouth. "If you don't let me out of here, I'm going to scream."

"Nelly—"

"I mean it, Karl, I'm going to scream."

He opened his hands wide. "You're free to go, Nell. If I wanted to hurt you, I could have done it a long time ago."

She pushed the walker before her like a shield. Her hands were slipping on the metal. As she passed Karl, she didn't look at him.

The walls seemed narrower and the distance to her room much too short. When she got inside, she closed the door, wishing that it would lock. But she knew that part of her fear was irrational. There wasn't much a ninety-five-year-old man could do to her here, not in this home filled with bright lights and young nurses. All she had to do was scream and someone would come to her. They didn't ignore screams in Household 5.

Nell tugs at her knickers. No matter how tightly she ties them, they always stay uncomfortably loose about the waist. She has been reluctant to slide into a base like Chucky tells her to because she's afraid that if she does her knickers will come off.

She takes the path that goes through Kirschman's apple orchard. Mr. Kirschman hates it when the kids take the shortcut through his orchard, but they do anyway.

As she turns the corner to the center of the orchard, someone clamps a hand over her mouth and drags her back against the tree. The hand is tight and slippery. It smells like iron.

"Nelly, promise not to scream if I let you go?"

The voice is Karl's. She nods. Slowly he releases her.

"What were you trying to do?"

He raises a grimy finger to his lips. His dark hair stands out in sharp relief to his pale skin. "I don't want you to go any farther, okay? I want you to go back and get your father right away. Promise?"

Nell nods again. She's staring at his stained white shirt and she realizes that it is covered with blood. She wipes at her mouth and her hand comes away bloody.

"Nell—"

She turns and starts to run, not realizing until she's rounded the corner that she's disobeyed Karl. There, lying across the orchard path, is her sister. Bess's hair is strewn about her, and her blouse is covered with blood.

"Nell, it'll be okay, just—"

Nell screams. Karl is standing behind her. She pushes him out of her way and runs down the orchard path toward home. This time running seems easy although the air still catches in her throat. She can't hear Karl behind her, and as she nears the house, she knows she's safe. Karl won't hurt her, Karl would never hurt her. The only one Karl hurts is Bess, and that is Bess's fault because she doesn't listen to Papa and now it's too late, it's all too late because Nell has left her there, bleeding and helpless, with Karl, the man who hurts her, the man whose hands are covered with blood.

"Did I ever tell you that my sister was murdered?"
Anna smoothed her already neat skirt and sighed.
"Yes, Mother." Her tone said, *A thousand times, Mother. Do I have to hear it again?*

Nell clutched her hands in her lap, trying to decide if she should continue. Anna would never believe her. Even though she was fifty-five, Anna rarely thought about anything more serious than clothing and makeup. And, of course, she had never known her Aunt Bess.

"I saw the man who killed her."

Anna suddenly became stiff, and her eyes focused on something beyond Nell's shoulder.

Nell's heart was pounding. Her oldest, Elizabeth, would have listened. But Bess had been dead for six years. "I think I told you this once," Nell said. "But the man who killed her—his name was Karl—also killed her fiancé, Edmund. And they never caught him. And it used to frighten me, thinking that someday he'd come back for me."

"That was a long time ago, Mother." Anna's voice had an edge to it.

"I know." Nell's fingers had grown cold. "But I wouldn't be telling you now if it weren't important."

Anna looked at her mother full in the face, a deep, piercing look. "Why is it important now?"

"Because he's here," Nell whispered. The words sounded too melodramatic, but she couldn't take them back. "He's across the hall."

Anna took a deep breath. "Mother, even if he were here, there's nothing he could do. He probably doesn't even remember you."

"He remembers," Nell said. "I talked to him."

"Even so." Anna reached out and took Nell's hand. Her palm was warm and moist. "He's an elderly man. He probably won't live long. If we called the police and they verified what you said, he probably wouldn't even make it to trial. I mean, who else knows about the murder, besides you?"

"My father knew and—"

"Anyone living?"

"No." Tears were building in Nell's eyes. She blinked rapidly.

"Then it would be your word against his, and frankly, Mother, I don't think it's worth it. I mean, what can you gain now? He'll die soon and then you won't have to worry."

"No." A tear traced its way down Nell's cheek and stopped on her lips. She licked it away quickly, hoping Anna didn't see. "He won't die soon."

Anna frowned. "Why not?"

"He's working on an experiment to prolong his life."

"Oh, for God's sake, Mother." Anna pulled her hand away. "How many other people have you told this piece of nonsense to?"

"I haven't—"

A nurse knocked on the door and walked in. She set a tray next to Nell's armchair. "I have your medication, Nell."

Nell reached over and took the Dixie cup. The liquid inside was brown. "This doesn't look like my medication."

She looked up in time to see Anna shaking her head at the nurse.

"Just drink it, Nell," the nurse said in her fakely sweet voice "and it'll be all right."

Nell took a sniff of the cup. The contents smelled bitter. "I really don't want it."

"Mother," Anna snapped. Then in a confidential tone to the nurse, she said, "Mother is having a bad day."

"The past few days have been difficult," the nurse said. "She hasn't gone to meals and she won't leave her room at all."

"Is that true, Mother?"

Nell swirled the liquid in her cup. Sediment floated around the bottom. Suddenly she realized that it didn't matter. No one would care if Karl poisoned her. She put the cup to her lips and drank before she could change her mind.

The liquid bit at her tongue like homemade whisky. She coughed once and then set the cup down. "I don't see why you want to know," she said.

Anna pursed her lips. "Mother, really."

Nell rubbed her tongue against the roof of her mouth, but she couldn't make the taste go away. She grabbed the side of her chair and got to her feet. Her hips cracked slightly when she stood. The nurse handed her the walker.

"Where are you going, Nell?"

Nell didn't reply. She moved the walker toward the sink, and got herself a drink of water.

"I'm afraid my mother may not be well," Anna said softly. "She was just telling me that the man across the hall murdered her sister, and she's afraid that he's after her."

"Mr. Krupp? I wouldn't think so. He's been bedridden since he came here."

"Maybe you should say something." Anna stopped speaking as Nell turned around. Nell made her way back to the armchair. The nurse took her arm as she sat down.

"Nell, I understand the man across the hall frightens you."

Nell looked up at the nurse's round face, trying to remember her name without glancing at the name tag. "No. Whatever gave you that idea?"

"Your daughter was saying that he made you nervous."

The name tag said DANA, L.P.N. "I haven't even seen him and he's very quiet. Why would that make me nervous?"

The nurse smiled and picked up the tray. "I was just checking, Nell."

Anna waited until the nurse left before speaking. "Why did you lie to her, Mother?"

"I don't know why you come visit me," Nell said.

Anna slid her chair back and stood up. "I don't know either sometimes. But I'm sure I'll be back." She picked up her coat and slung it around her shoulder. "And, Mother, it's better for you to socialize, you know, than to stay locked up in your room. Talking to other people will give you something to think about, so that your mind won't wander."

She walked out. Nell waited until she could no longer hear the click of Anna's high heels on the tile floor. "My mind doesn't wander," she murmured. But the nurse had said that Karl was bed-ridden, and he had looked so healthy to her. Nell sighed and then frowned. What would he be doing in Household 5 if he couldn't get out of bed?

Nell picks up the bat and takes a practice swing. Her dress sways with her, but she won't wear the knickers Karl gave her. Bess has been dead for a week, and Nell is lonely.

"What are you doing here?" Chucky asks. They are alone. The other boys haven't arrived yet.

"Wanna play," she says.

He frowns. "In a dress? Where are your knickers?"

"Threw them out." She hits the bat against the dirt like she's seen Pete do.

"You can't run in a dress."

"I can try." Her anger is sharp and quick. She hasn't been able to control her moods since Bess died. "I'm sorry."

Chucky ducks his head and looks away. "It's okay."

"I'm sorry," she says again, and looks at the playing field. The grass has been ruined near the bases. Sometimes she thinks baseball is the only dream she has left. Now, with Bess dead and Karl gone, even that seems impossible. "I'll just go home."

"No," Chucky says. "I mean, you can play."

She smiles a little and shakes her head. "Not in a dress. You were right."

"Wait." He touches her arm and then runs to his house, letting the porch door slam behind him. She goes to home base and swings the bat again, pretending that she has hit a home run. It is a good feeling, to send the ball whistling across the creek. She loves nothing more. If only she were a little boy, she could play baseball forever. Karl once told her that she could turn into a boy when she kissed her elbow. She tried for weeks before she realized that kissing her own elbow was impossible. She will never be a boy, but she will be good at baseball.

Chucky comes back. He thrusts some cloth into her hand. "Here," he says.

She unfolds it. He's given her a pair of frayed and poorly mended knickers. "Chucky?"

"They don't fit me no more. Maybe they'll fit you."

"But isn't your brother supposed to get them?"

"Nah," he says, but doesn't meet her eyes.

"I don't want to take them if it'll get you in trouble."

"It won't." He studies her, sees that she's unconvinced. "Look, you're the best hitter on the team. I don't want to lose you."

She smiles, a real smile this time, one that she feels. "Thanks, Chucky."

Nell resumed her walks again, making sure that she took them around medication time.

Karl's door remained closed for days, but she finally caught him in the hallway, switching Dixie cups on the trays.

"You're switching my medication," she said. She stood straight, leaning on her walker, knowing that he couldn't touch her in the halls.

"Yes, I am," he replied.

She swallowed heavily. She hadn't expected him to admit it. "Why?"

"I guess I kinda feel like I owe you, Nell."

"For killing Bess?"

He set the cup down on the tray marked with her room number. His hand was trembling. "I didn't kill Bess," he said quietly. "I killed Edmund."

"You're lying."

He shook his head. "I was going to meet Bess that morning in the orchard. We were going to run away together. Edmund got there first, and he killed her. So I went and I killed him."

Nell could feel the power of that morning, the sunlight against her skin, his bloody fingers across her lips. "Why—didn't you tell somebody?"

"I still committed a murder, Nelly."

That's why he had told her to get her father. That's why he had never come back to kill her, too. "Why—" She shook her head in an attempt to clear it. "Why did you come back here?"

"Wisconsin is my home, Nell." He was leaning on the cart for support. "I wanted to die at home."

"But your experiment?"

He smiled. "I've outlived most of my siblings for a good twenty years. And the formula wasn't quite right for me at first. We've changed it, so yours is better from the start."

"Mine?"

"Nelly." He bowed his head slightly and ran his fingers through his thick, silver hair. The gesture made her think of the old Karl, the one who had taught her how to laugh and how to hit home runs. "What did you think? That I was poisoning you?"

She nodded.

"I'm not. I'm trying the drug on you. I know I should have asked, but you didn't trust me, and it was just easier to do it this way."

"Why me?" she asked.

"Lots of reasons." The cart slid forward slightly and he had to catch himself to keep from falling. "I don't know many people who still play baseball when they're seventy years old. Or learn to walk again when the doctors say they can't. You're strong, Nelly. The power of your mind is amazing."

"But what if I don't want to live any longer?"

"You do or you wouldn't be out here, trying to catch me."

"I have caught you." The hallway was empty. Usually it was full of people walking back and forth.

"I know," Karl said. "What are you going to do? Call a nurse, tell them to arrest me? There's no statute of limitations on murder, you know."

Nell studied him for a moment. He was thin and his skin was pale. He was ninety-five. How much longer could he live?

"I don't want any more of your medication," she said.

He stood motionlessly, waiting for her to say something else.

She moved her walker forward, on the other side of the cart. "And I don't want to talk any more."

She didn't let herself look back as she slowly made her way down the hall. Imagine if she could walk without a walker, without pain. Imagine if she could live longer than her father, who had died when he was ninety-eight. She wasn't ready to give up living yet. Some days she felt as if she had only just started.

When she reached her own door, she stopped and looked back at Karl's. Once she had believed in Karl and his miracles. She did no longer.

The world has reduced itself to the ball clutched in Pete's hand.

"Throw it straight," Chucky yells.

Pete spits. Nell barely notices. She watches that ball, knowing that when he throws it she will hit it with all her strength. Time seems to slow down as the ball whizzes toward her. She knows how the ball will fly, where it will end up, and she swings the bat down to meet it. There is a satisfying crack as they hit and time speeds up again.

"Holy cow!" Chucky cries, but Nell ignores him as she drops the bat. Out of the corner of her eye, she sees the ball sail over the creek. She runs as fast as she can. Her right foot hits first base, and she keeps going, flying, like the ball. It disappears into the weeds behind the creek as her left foot hits second. Her glasses bounce off her nose between second and third, and she is navigating according to color. Her lungs are burning as her left foot hits the rock that is third base.

"Go, Nelly! Go!"

She runs toward the blurred shapes behind home. There is a stitch in her side and her entire body aches, but she keeps moving. She leaps on home base and her team cheers, but she can't stop. She has run too hard to stop right away, and she crashes into Chucky, who hugs her.

"Great!" he says. "That was great!"

She stands there, savoring the moment. Karl would have been proud of her. But Karl would never know. She wipes the sweat off her forehead and says, "I lost my glasses."

As Chucky trudges out to retrieve them, she realizes she can get no higher than this; her tiny girl's body, for all its batting accuracy,

will prevent her from going on. But she doesn't care. If she can't play on a real team, she will hit home runs until she is a hundred, long after these boys are dead.

"That was great, Nelly," Chucky says as he hands her her glasses. "Really great."

She checks the lenses, which haven't cracked; and then bends the frame back into shape. "Not bad for a girl," she says with a glance at TJ. Then she goes over to the grass and sits at the end of the line, hoping that she'll get another chance at bat.

The sound of running feet woke Nell up. She had heard that sound before. Someone had died or was dying and they wanted to get him out before the other residents knew.

She grabbed her glasses and got out of bed, carefully making her way to the door. They were gathered in front of Karl's room. Two men wheeled a stretcher out. The body was strapped in and the face was covered. Quickly they pushed him out of sight.

She crossed the empty hallway. The tile beneath her feet felt cold and gritty. They had left Karl's door open, and she stopped just outside it, catching the smell of death under the scent of ink and books.

"Nell?" One of the nurses started down the hall toward her.

"Is he dead?" she asked.

"Mr. Krupp? I'm afraid so. I'm sorry if it disturbed you."

"No, not really," Nell said. She drew her nightgown closely about her chest. She was getting cold.

"He probably shouldn't have been in this household," the nurse said. "He was much too sick, but his family wanted him to have a private room."

Nell wondered how the nurse expected her to believe that. One glance inside Karl's room made it obvious that he hadn't been bedridden. Nell surveyed the room once more. The desk top was bare and the vials were gone, but otherwise it looked the same.

The nurse finally reached her side. Nell recognized her as the round-faced one who usually gave her her medicine. Dana, L.P.N.

"How did you get out here?" Dana L.P.N. asked.

"Walked," Nell said.

Dana L.P.N. shot her a perplexed look. "Well, let's get you back to bed, shall we?"

She put her arm around Nell's waist and helped her back to the room. The support wasn't necessary until they reached the door.

When Nell saw her walker in its usual place beside the bed, her knees buckled.

"Nell?"

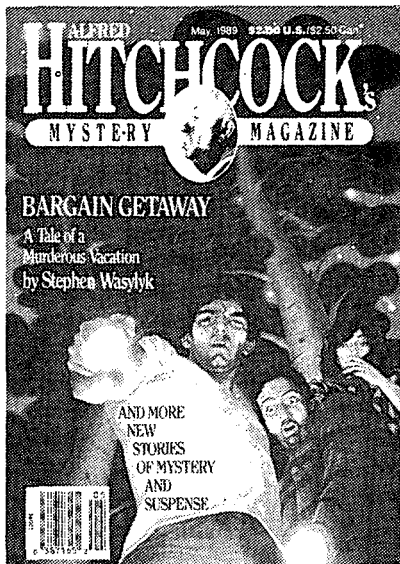
Nell straightened herself and pushed out of the nurse's grasp. She made her way to the side of the bed and lightly touched her walker. "I'm fine," she said.

She climbed into the bed and lay there until she heard the nurse's footsteps echo down the hall. Then she got up and walked slowly around her room.

You're strong, Nelly, he had said. The power of your mind is amazing.

She walked to the door and stared at Karl's empty room across the hall. The drawing was still there, its spirals twisting like a malformed ladder. Beneath the stunned joy that she was feeling, frustration beat at her stomach. She would never know if it was her own determination or Karl's bitter medicine that made her legs work again, just as she would never know if he had actually killed her sister or if he had been lying. She wanted to believe that it was the power of her own mind, but her mind's healing took time. She had started to walk within days of receiving the medication.

Nell went back to the bed and sat down, wondering what Anna would say when she learned that her mother could walk again. Then Nell decided that it didn't matter. What mattered was that her feet which had run bases, chased two children, and carried her through decades of living worked again. Once she had vowed to hit home runs until she was a hundred. And maybe, just maybe, she would.



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FICTION

Neighbors

by Hope Raymond



Illustration by Glenn Wolff

126

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Miss Parsons sat on the back steps, the spring sun warming her thin shoulders. It was the kind of day that makes winter worth surviving. Wisps of cloud decorated a soft hyacinth-blue sky. A redwinged blackbird sang in the reeds that bordered the pond. Beyond him, sailing the breeze-rippled water, a majestic white swan patrolled the marshy shoreline, guarding his invisible mate on her nest at the water's edge. Nearer the house, crocuses bloomed around the old cement birdbath, and warblers chipped to each other in the forsythia. Ulysses the beagle, at her feet, stretched himself out on the new grass and gave a contented sigh.

Miss Parsons, however, was experiencing no lift of the spirit. As she gazed across her own neat yard to the tangled wilderness beyond, her expression was somber. The unthinkable, it seemed, was about to happen.

She had coveted the adjacent lot, which, like her own, ran from the lane down to the pond and seemed somehow to have been overlooked when the surrounding farms were laid out, ever since she and her mother had moved into the little house at the end of the lane years ago, when she had first come to teach at Bayern High. Even then it had been overgrown and of no apparent use to anybody except the birds and rabbits. In those days, though, she had had no spare time to seek out the owner and no spare money to offer when he was found.

Later, when by saving and inheritance she had acquired a little cushion, she had made inquiries and learned that the land belonged to old Mrs. Burger, who spent most of her time in a wheelchair and refused to discuss business. Miss Parsons had been advised to wait and make an offer to the estate later on. She had accepted this suggestion all the more readily because Mrs. Burger had had no children and the probable heir was Betty Vogel, Mrs. Burger's great-niece, a friendly acquaintance; she and Miss Parsons both sang in the Bayern Light Opera Club. No one thought Miss Parsons would have long to wait.

But Mrs. Burger surprised everybody. By the time she finally lost her hold, at ninety-seven, Miss Parsons' mother had preceded her, and Miss Parsons herself was ready for retirement.

When, after a decent interval, Miss Parsons approached Betty with an offer to buy the lot, she received disconcerting news. Although Betty had been left the Burger house and most of the money, the land on Schimmler's Lane had gone to Fred Jansen, a nephew

of Mrs. Burger's in Chicago. He was understood to have something to do with wheat futures.

"I don't know him very well," Betty had said. "I don't think Aunt Anna liked him much, and he never came to see her. But he was her brother's son and I suppose she thought she owed him something. George Winters is handling the estate. I guess you could call him and make an offer, and he could pass it on to Fred. I expect Fred'd be glad to sell the lot to you. I don't think he cares anything about Bayern, and who else would want it besides you?"

That question had been answered promptly by George Winters. Mr. Jansen, he said, had asked him to dispose of the land at the best possible price as soon as it was legally his. He had heard from a tavern owner in the next town who wanted to put up a small resort there. This man proposed to clear the land completely and erect a building big enough for Saturday night dances. With a large parking lot, boats for rent, and, naturally, a bar. Of course, George said, Mr. Jansen would be just as happy to sell to Miss Parsons if she would care to match the tavern keeper's price. He named a sum that was more than Miss Parsons could have raised if she had bankrupted herself.

Miss Parsons was appalled. She had bought her house in the first place because she liked privacy and peace, and had worked hard to get the place the way she liked it. Now, when she was ready to enjoy it, this. She could look forward to trespassing drunks. Constant auto traffic. Curious strangers peering at her from the pond. Casual vandalism.

Fighting a rear-guard action, she had appealed to the town authorities to zone the tavern out or buy the land for a nature reserve. But times had been hard in Bayern. Everyone sympathized with Miss Parsons, but no one wanted to discourage any enterprise that might bring money into the town, and as for buying parks, she knew very well that there were potholes on Main Street and the high school needed a new roof.

Betty Vogel had offered to intercede for her with Fred Jansen. She would tell him, she said, that Aunt Anna would have liked Miss Parsons to have the land if he didn't want it himself. Miss Parsons had had very little faith in this appeal to sentiment, but she had nothing to lose by letting Betty go ahead.

Betty had just telephoned with a report. Fred Jansen had called her from Minneapolis the previous day to ask when the estate was likely to be settled. She had pled Miss Parsons' case, but he had

been completely unresponsive. According to him, things were not going well in the futures markets, and he needed to get all he could from the land.

"Personally, I think he's just being a pig," Betty had said. "If only it was his daughter. I know her. She's nice, and she's married to a surgeon, she doesn't need money. I'm real sorry."

Miss Parsons had felt, somehow, that she could assimilate this final blow more easily if she went outside. But her mind refused to deal with it. At her feet, Ulysses muttered a little, and she managed to formulate the thought that he wouldn't like it if they had to move to an apartment. She had decided some time ago that if the resort was definitely coming she would sell out and move into town. With a prospective neighbor like that, she couldn't expect to get much.

The sound of an automobile approaching down Schimmler's Lane made her pull herself together and rise to her feet, prepared for visitors. People who drove down the lane were usually on their way to see her.

The noise of the engine cut off before she reached the front yard, and no car was in sight. While she was still asking herself whether she had been hearing things, a pudgy, balding stranger dragging a small kayak on a wheeled carrier came trudging down the lane. Perhaps it was the peculiar picture he presented that disturbed the normally friendly Ulysses, who had followed her to the front yard. His lips drew back from his teeth and he growled in his throat.

The man hailed her as soon as he came within voice range.

"This the Burger property?" he said, gesturing toward the tangle of underbrush.

"That's right," said Miss Parsons. She advanced to meet him.

The man propped the carrier against a tree and pulled out a handkerchief, with which he wiped his brow. He looked pasty and out of condition, Miss Parsons thought. She wondered why he had dressed in a business suit if he planned to go boating.

"I just inherited it," said the man. "Kind of a godforsaken spot, isn't it? Guess I shouldn't complain. Never expected old Anna to leave me anything. We didn't get along. Thought as long as I was driving through anyway I might as well have a look at it. Got a pretty good offer for it, better than I was expecting, and thought there might be something more here than I realized." A sly look crossed his face. "You never know, do you? Lawyer tells me the

guy wants it for the pond frontage, and the best way to see that is from a boat. So I rented this." He gestured toward the kayak. "Hope I can still work it. Haven't used one since camp. Lawyer says it's marshy down by the shore but there's a path that leads to the remains of an old dock I can take off from. That right, do you know?"

"You must be Mr. Jansen," said Miss Parsons. "I can't tell you about the path, I haven't been down it lately. I'd be trespassing, wouldn't I?"

Something about her tone seemed to arrest Jansen. "You the lady wanted to buy the land?" he said. "Couldn't match the other offer?"

"I'm a teacher," said Miss Parsons. "We don't get rich. I would have offered more if I'd had more. I don't want a tavern for a neighbor."

Jansen's gaze swept over her neat little house and garden, her well-weeded lawn, and a flash of compunction crossed his face. Then it settled again into a hard geniality. "Too bad," he said. "But business is business, isn't it? That the path to the dock I passed a few feet back?"

"I believe so," said Miss Parsons. She hesitated a moment, and then, as if forcing herself, went on, "Better be careful down by the marsh."

Jansen gave her a knowing look. "Trying to scare me off?" he said. "No quicksand or water moccasins around here. Well, thanks for your help. I better get going." He seized the carrier again and headed back toward the path.

Miss Parsons gazed after him a moment, as if wondering whether to add to her warning. Then she shook her head slightly and turned toward the house, Ulysses beside her. She felt she had been fair.

When the deputy sheriff drove up the next day, he found Miss Parsons kneeling beside the petunia bed in her front yard, a little pile of weeds beside her. She rose to her feet as he got out of the car. Ulysses, digging furiously under the hedge for a putative rabbit, paid no attention to him.

"Morning, Miss Parsons," said the deputy respectfully. He had had her for American history at Bayern High ten years earlier.

"Good morning, Carl," said Miss Parsons. "What brings you out here?"

"Seems there's been an accident in the pond," said the deputy.

"They wanted me to ask you if you saw anything."

"An accident?" said Miss Parsons. "Well, you'd better come in if you want to question me." She led the way into the house and established him at the polished dining table. "Now, what did you want to ask me?" she said.

Carl hesitated. He was finding it difficult to take charge of the interview; he was used to thinking of Miss Parsons as Authority. But he pulled himself together. "Thing is," he said, "Bill Dorfman over the other side was out on his hill this morning, checking on his cows, and he saw something floating in the pond, looked like a kayak upside down. So he got his canoe out of the barn and paddled over, and there was this kayak, and a man lying in the shallows. Bill towed him over to his side, where it was easier to get him ashore, and worked on him for a while, but it didn't do any good. So he called us and we came out. The man was dead all right. Stranger to Bill, he said. We checked his wallet. Name's Jansen. Comes from Chicago. Lives in a hotel there. The office is trying to locate some family. We'll have to make a report. First thing is, what was he doing in the pond? Bill said he didn't see him go by his place. Wondered if you'd seen him."

"A Mr. Jansen with a kayak came down this way yesterday," said Miss Parsons. "He said he'd come to look at the land he inherited up the lane." She described her visitor.

"Sounds like him," said Carl. "Alone, was he?"

"As far as I know," said Miss Parsons. "Although I didn't see his car—from the sound, he parked it farther up the lane, and I suppose he could have left somebody in it. But he spoke as though he were alone, and he had a one-man kayak. And if he'd had a companion, the person would have given the alarm, surely."

"Nobody came here?" said Carl.

"Not a soul."

"Bill says he didn't see anybody either. And nobody called us."

"Why do you think there was somebody with him?"

Carl looked unhappy. "Thing is, the doc doesn't think he drowned. Says it looks more like a heart attack, but not a peaceful one. There are bruises on his face and arms, like somebody'd been beating up on him with a stick or something and he tried to shield himself. May have been fright that put him out, the doc thinks."

"Are you saying this unfortunate man was murdered?" said Miss Parsons.

"Well, helped along, you might say."

"Good heavens," said Miss Parsons.

"Yours is the only house that overlooks the pond," said Carl. "You didn't see anything, I guess?"

"I was working inside all afternoon," said Miss Parsons. "Ulysses didn't bark. Of course, he doesn't always. He's not a very good watchdog, I'm afraid." She spoke with gentle regret, but no sign of fear that Carl could notice. He had worried that the thought of a lurking menace might frighten her.

"I'll have a look at that patch next door on my way out," he said, getting to his feet. "Not that it'll do any good. If there was anybody there, he's long gone."

"You should find Mr. Jansen's car there," said Miss Parsons.

"Saw it on the way in," said Carl. "He'd pulled off the lane under a tree. I'll have a look at that, too."

"Be careful down in the marsh," said Miss Parsons. "You don't know what you might run into."

"Oh, I don't think we'll have to do much down there, except to see where he started out from," said Carl. "Too wet and tangled for anybody to hide in, Bill says."

"I dare say that's right," said Miss Parsons, following him toward the door.

Carl opened it and then paused on the threshold. "Well, thanks," he said. "If you think of anything or if you need us, give us a call. If you wanted to come into town for a day or so, just till we're sure there's nobody hanging around, lots of people'd be glad to have you. Nedda and I would, only it's kind of noisy with the baby."

Miss Parsons smiled at him. "That's very kind of you, Carl," she said. "But don't worry. I'll be all right." She closed the door gently behind him.

As he headed toward the path to the old dock, Carl cast a final look back at the little house. He had heard about Miss Parsons' efforts to buy the land; everybody in Bayern heard practically everything. If Jansen was indeed the man who had inherited it, this death might turn out very convenient for her, and she had certainly taken it calmly. It was hard to believe, but could she possibly have . . . ? Then he shook his head. Miss Parsons was about five feet two and probably weighed ninety-eight pounds after Thanksgiving dinner. Jansen, although not in the best of condition, had been considerably bigger and stronger. There was no way. . . . Carl gave a sigh of relief. He simply could not imagine himself arresting Miss Parsons.

A month went by. Miss Parsons planted her vegetables and attended her committee meetings. The sheriff's office continued its investigations. The crocuses faded and the tulips came out.

On a particularly balmy day, Miss Parsons drove her subcompact into Bayern to do some errands. In the post office she ran into Carl.

"Have you found out yet what happened to poor Mr. Jansen?" she said, after they had exchanged greetings.

"Oh, we're dropping it," said Carl. "We checked back on where he'd spent the night—it was a business trip—and he was alone then, and he got gas in town here just before you saw him and he was still alone. And there haven't been any strangers showing up in the area. Doc says he got the bruises before he died, but it might not have been down at the pond. He might have been in a fight somewhere. We couldn't pick up any traces of one, but you can't always. Something like that happens in a tavern, say, they'd just as soon not talk about it. We're calling it a natural death from heart failure. His daughter, she's satisfied about it—says his doctor told him to be careful, but he wasn't."

"I see," said Miss Parsons. She was quite sure that there had been no bruises on Jansen's face when she had spoken with him, but she had no intention of saying so. "Well, that must be a relief to you. How's the baby?"

The baby, it seemed, was fine. Miss Parsons must come and see him some day. Miss Parsons promised to do so soon, and passed out of the post office. An old pupil, observing her as she headed down Main Street toward the stationery store, noticed how light her step was. Outside the bakery she encountered Betty Vogel.

"Oh, Nell!" said Betty. "I've been meaning to call you. I've got good news and bad news."

"Tell me the bad news first," said Miss Parsons.

"Well, I've talked to Helen, Fred Jansen's daughter, you know, she's his heir, and she doesn't want to sell that land to you. The good news is she doesn't want to sell it to anybody else, either. She and her husband'll keep it—might build a weekend cottage there later on. She'd be a good neighbor—I'm sure you'll like her. And that'd be a lot better than a tavern, wouldn't it?"

A small but genuine smile appeared on Miss Parsons' lips and spread to her eyes. "A great deal better," she said. "I'd like to have the land, of course, but it'd be nice to have a good neighbor, too, now I'm getting older. Thanks, Betty."

On the way home, she sang softly to herself. As soon as she had

stowed away her purchases, she took a loaf of sliced bread from the refrigerator, pulled on a pair of rubber boots, and, accompanied by Ulysses, made her way down to the pond, where the whole swan family was now on display, with the proud cob in the lead, four tiny, fluffy beige cygnets paddling valiantly after him, and the pen in the rear. Parting the reeds, she clumped to the shoreline and began throwing out bits of bread. As the cob changed course and headed in her direction, followed by his family, Ulysses whined softly and began to back away. The cob looked graceful and harmless now, but earlier in the season Ulysses had explored too close to the swans' nest and had encountered a slashing bill, a neck like a bull whip, and mighty wings that could break a man's leg with a blow. Gifted with agility and a sound heart, he had escaped safely, but he had no desire to meet the cob again.

Miss Parsons fed the swans the entire loaf of bread. It was the only way she could think of to thank them.

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Suspect #1: Lawrence the butler always lies.

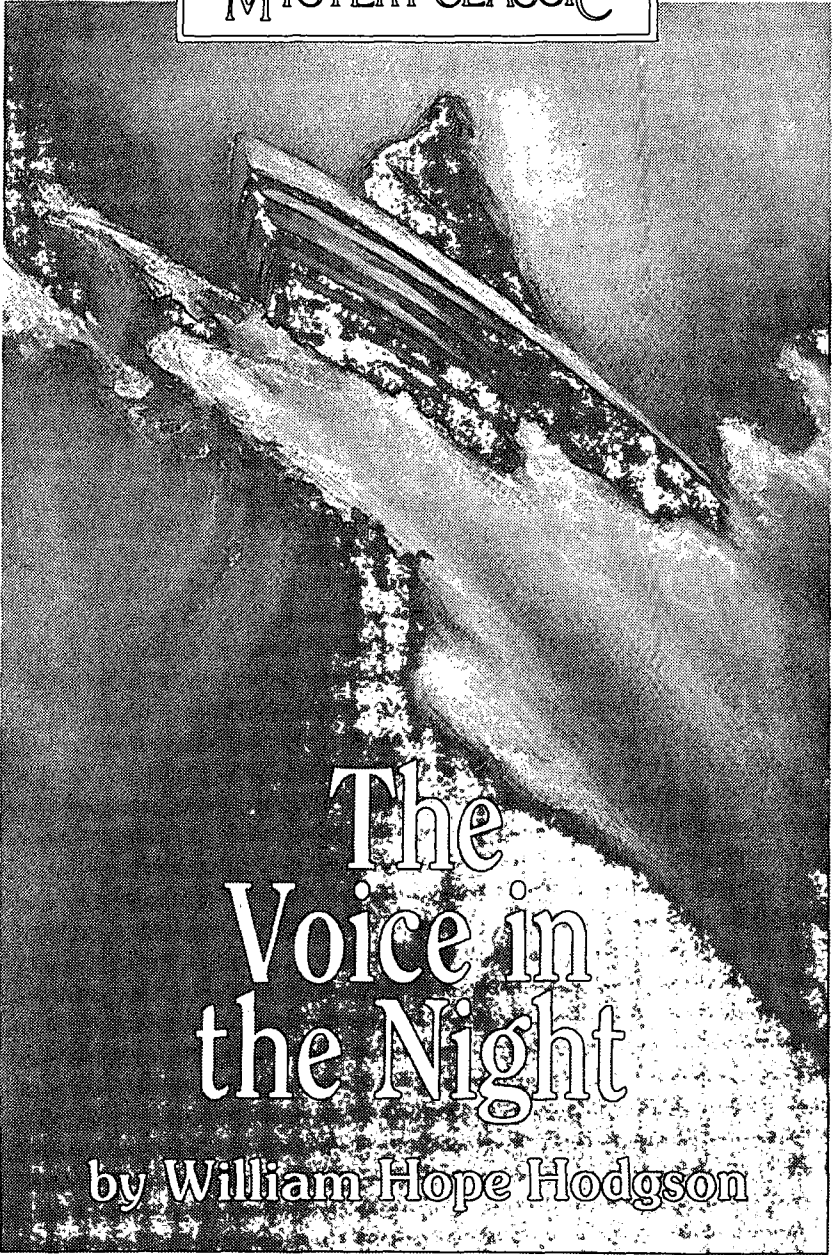
Suspect #2: Becky the chauffeur always tells the truth.

Suspect #3: Rachel the cook sometimes lies and sometimes tells the truth; she is the murderer.

Suspect #4: Dick the gardener always tells the truth.

Suspect #5: Randi the upstairs maid always lies.

MYSTERY CLASSIC



The Voice in the Night

by William Hope Hodgson

Illustration by Karen Stolper

135

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It was a dark, starless night. We were becalmed in the Northern Pacific. Our exact position I do not know; for the sun had been hidden during the course of a weary, breathless week by a thin haze which had seemed to float above us, about the height of our mastheads, at whiles descending and shrouding the surrounding sea.

With there being no wind, we had steadied the tiller, and I was the only man on deck. The crew, consisting of two men and a boy, were sleeping forward in their den; while Will—my friend, and the master of our little craft—was aft in his bunk on the port side of the little cabin.

Suddenly, from out of the surrounding darkness, there came a hail:

"Schooner, ahoy!"

The cry was so unexpected that I gave no immediate answer, because of my surprise.

It came again—a voice curiously throaty and inhuman, calling from somewhere upon the dark sea away on our port broadside:

"Schooner, ahoy!"

"Hullo!" I sang out, having gathered my wits somewhat. "What are you? What do you want?"

"You need not be afraid," answered the queer voice, having probably noticed some trace of confusion in my tone. "I am only an old—man."

The pause sounded oddly; but it was only afterwards that it came back to me with any significance.

"Why don't you come alongside, then?" I queried somewhat snapishly; for I liked not his hinting at my having been a trifle shaken.

"I—I—can't. It wouldn't be safe. I—" The voice broke off, and there was silence.

"What do you mean?" I asked, growing more and more astonished. "What not safe? Where are you?"

I listened for a moment; but there came no answer. And then, a sudden indefinite suspicion, of I knew not what, coming to me, I stepped swiftly to the binnacle, and took out the lighted lamp. At the same time, I knocked on the deck with my heel to waken Will. Then I was back at the side, throwing the yellow funnel of light out into the silent immensity beyond our rails. As I did so, I heard a slight, muffled cry, and then the sound of a splash as though someone had dipped oars abruptly. Yet I cannot say that

I saw anything with certainty; save, it seemed to me, that with the first flash of the light, there had been something upon the waters, where now there was nothing.

"Hullo, there!" I called. "What foolery is this!"

But there came only the indistinct sounds of a boat being pulled away into the night.

Then I heard Will's voice, from the direction of the after scuttle:

"What's up, George?"

"Come here, Will!" I said.

"What is it?" he asked, coming across the deck.

I told him the queer thing which had happened. He put several questions; then, after a moment's silence, he raised his hands to his lips, and hailed:

"Boat, ahoy!"

From a long distance away there came back to us a faint reply, and my companion repeated his call. Presently, after a short period of silence, there grew on our hearing the muffled sound of oars; at which Will hailed again.

This time there was a reply:

"Put away the light."

"I'm damned if I will," I muttered; but Will told me to do as the voice bade, and I shoved it down under the bulwarks.

"Come nearer," he said, and the oar strokes continued. Then, when apparently some half dozen fathoms distant, they again ceased.

"Come alongside," exclaimed Will. "There's nothing to be frightened of aboard here!"

"Promise that you will not show the light?"

"What's to do with you?" I burst out, "that you're so infernally afraid of the light?"

"Because—" began the voice, and stopped short.

"Because what?" I asked quickly.

Will put his hand on my shoulder.

"Shut up a minute, old man," he said in a low voice. "Let me tackle him."

He leaned more over the rail.

"See here, mister," he said, "this is a pretty queer business, you coming upon us like this, right out in the middle of the blessed Pacific. How are we to know what sort of a hanky-panky trick you're up to? You say there's only one of you. How are we to know,

unless we get a squint at you—eh? What's your objection to the light, anyway?"

As he finished, I heard the noise of the oars again, and then the voice came; but now from a greater distance, and sounding extremely hopeless and pathetic.

"I am sorry—sorry! I would not have troubled you, only I am hungry, and—so is she."

The voice died away, and the sound of the oars, dipping irregularly, was borne to us.

"Stop!" sung out Will. "I don't want to drive you away. Come back! We'll keep the light hidden, if you don't like it."

He turned to me:

"It's a damned queer rig, this; but I think there's nothing to be afraid of?"

There was a question in his tone, and I replied.

"No, I think the poor devil's been wrecked around here, and gone crazy."

The sound of the oars drew nearer.

"Shove that lamp back in the binnacle," said Will; then he leaned over the rail and listened. I replaced the lamp, and came back to his side. The dipping of the oars ceased some dozen yards distant.

"Won't you come alongside now?" asked Will in an even voice. "I have had the lamp put back in the binnacle."

"I—I cannot," replied the voice. "I dare not come nearer. I dare not even pay you for the—the provisions."

"That's all right," said Will, and hesitated. "You're welcome to as much grub as you can take—" Again he hesitated.

"You are very good," exclaimed the voice. "May God, Who understands everything, reward you—" It broke off huskily.

"The—the lady?" said Will abruptly. "Is she—"

"I have left her behind upon the island," came the voice.

"What island?" I cut in.

"I know not its name," returned the voice. "I would to God—" it began, and checked itself as suddenly.

"Could we not send a boat for her?" asked Will at this point.

"No!" said the voice, with extraordinary emphasis. "My God! No!" There was a moment's pause; then it added, in a tone which seemed a merited reproach:

"It was because of our want I ventured—because her agony tortured me."

"I am a forgetful brute," exclaimed Will. "Just wait a minute, whoever you are, and I will bring you up something at once."

In a couple of minutes he was back again, and his arms were all of various edibles. He paused at the rail.

"Can't you come alongside for them?" he asked.

"No—I *dare not*," replied the voice, and it seemed to me that in its tones I detected a note of stifled craving—as though the owner hushed a mortal desire. It came to me then in a flash that the poor old creature out there in the darkness was *suffering* for actual need of that which Will held in his arms; and yet, because of some unintelligible dread, refraining from dashing to the side of our schooner, and receiving it. And with the lightninglike conviction, there came the knowledge that the Invisible was not mad; but sanely facing some intolerable horror.

"Damn it, Will!" I said, full of many feelings, over which predominated a vast sympathy. "Get a box. We must float off the stuff to him in it."

This we did—propelling it away from the vessel, out into the darkness, by means of a boathook. In a minute, a slight cry from the Invisible came to us, and we knew that he had secured the box.

A little later, he called out a farewell to us, and so heartfelt a blessing that I am sure we were the better for it. Then, without more ado, we heard the ply of oars across the darkness.

"Pretty soon off," remarked Will, with perhaps just a little sense of injury.

"Wait," I replied. "I think somehow he'll come back. He must have been badly needing that food."

"And the lady," said Will. For a moment he was silent; then he continued:

"It's the queerest thing ever I've tumbled across, since I've been fishing."

"Yes," I said, and fell to pondering.

And so the time slipped away—an hour, another, and still Will stayed with me; for the queer adventure had knocked all desire for sleep out of him.

The third hour was three parts through, when we heard again the sound of oars across the silent ocean.

"Listen!" said Will, a low note of excitement in his voice.

"He's coming, just as I thought," I muttered.

The dipping of the oars grew nearer, and I noted that the strokes

were firmer and longer. The food had been needed.

They came to a stop a little distance off the broadside, and the queer voice came again to us through the darkness:

"Schooner, ahoy!"

"That you?" asked Will.

"Yes," replied the voice. "I left you suddenly; but—but there was great need."

"The lady?" questioned Will.

"The—lady is grateful now on earth. She will be more grateful soon in—in heaven."

Will began to make some reply, in a puzzled voice; but became confused, and broke off short. I said nothing. I was wondering at the curious pauses, and, apart from my wonder, I was full of a great sympathy.

The voice continued:

"We—she and I, have talked, as we shared the result of God's tenderness and yours—"

Will interposed; but without coherence.

"I beg of you not to—to belittle your deed of Christian charity this night," said the voice. "Be sure that it has not escaped His notice."

It stopped, and there was a full minute's silence. Then it came again:

"We have spoken together upon that which—which has befallen us. We had thought to go out, without telling any, of the terror which has come into our—lives. She is with me in believing that tonight's happenings are under a special ruling, and that it is God's wish that we should tell to you all that we have suffered since—since—"

"Yes?" said Will softly.

"Since the sinking of the *Albatross*."

"Ah!" I exclaimed involuntarily. "She left Newcastle for 'Frisco some six months ago, and hasn't been heard of since."

"Yes," answered the voice. "But some few degrees to the north of the line she was caught in a terrible storm, and dismasted. When the day came, it was found that she was leaking badly, and presently, it falling to a calm, the sailors took to the boats, leaving—leaving a young lady—my fiancée—and myself upon the wreck.

"We were below, gathering together a few of our belongings, when they left. They were entirely callous, through fear, and when

we came up upon the decks, we saw them only as small shapes afar off upon the horizon. Yet we did not despair, but set to work and constructed a small raft. Upon this we put such few matters as it would hold, including a quantity of water and some ship's biscuit. Then, the vessel being very deep in the water, we got ourselves on to the raft, and pushed off.

"It was later, when I observed that we seemed to be in the way of some tide or current, which bore us from the ship at an angle; so that in the course of three hours, by my watch, her hull became invisible to our sight, her broken masts remaining in view for a somewhat longer period. Then, towards evening, it grew misty, and so through the night. The next day we were still encompassed by the mist, the weather remaining quiet.

"For four days we drifted through this strange haze, until, on the evening of the fourth day, there grew upon our ears the murmur of breakers at a distance. Gradually it became plainer, and, somewhat after midnight, it appeared to sound upon either hand at no very great space. The raft was raised upon as well several times, and then we were in smooth water, and the noise of the breakers was behind.

"When the morning came, we found that we were in a sort of great lagoon; but of this we noticed little at the time; for close before us, through the enshrouding mist, loomed the hull of a large sailing vessel. With one accord, we fell upon our knees and thanked God; for we thought that here was an end to our perils. We had much to learn.

"The raft drew near to the ship, and we shouted on them to take us aboard; but none answered. Presently the raft touched against the side of the vessel, and, seeing a rope hanging downwards, I seized it and began to climb. Yet I had much ado to make my way up because of a kind of gray, lichenous fungus which had seized upon the rope, and which blotched the side of the ship lividly.

"I reached the rail and clambered over it, on to the deck. Here I saw that the decks were covered, in great patches, with the gray masses, some of them rising into nodules several feet in height; but at the time I thought less of this matter than of the possibility of there being people aboard the ship. I shouted; but none answered. Then I went to the door below the poop deck. I opened it, and peered in. There was a great smell of staleness, so that I knew in a moment that nothing living was within, and with the knowledge,

I shut the door quickly; for I felt suddenly lonely.

"I went back to the side where I had scrambled up. My—my sweetheart was still sitting quietly upon the raft. Seeing me look down she called up to know whether there were any aboard of the ship. I replied that the vessel had the appearance of having been long deserted; but that if she would wait a little I would see whether there was anything in the shape of a ladder by which she could ascend to the deck. Then we would make a search through the vessel together. A little later, on the opposite side of the decks, I found a rope side ladder. This I carried across, and a minute afterwards she was beside me.

"Together we explored the cabins and apartments in the after part of the ship; but nowhere was there any sign of life. Here and there, within the cabins themselves, we came across odd patches of that queer fungus; but this, as my sweetheart said, could be cleansed away.

"In the end, having assured ourselves that the after portion of the vessel was empty, we picked our ways to the bows, between the ugly gray nodules of that strange growth; and here we made a further search, which told us that there was indeed none aboard but ourselves.

"This being now beyond any doubt, we returned to the stern of the ship and proceeded to make ourselves as comfortable as possible. Together we cleared out and cleaned two of the cabins; and after that I made examination whether there was anything eatable in the ship. This I soon found was so, and thanked God in my heart for His goodness. In addition to this I discovered the whereabouts of the fresh-water pump, and having fixed it I found the water drinkable, though somewhat unpleasant to the taste.

"For several days we stayed aboard the ship, without attempting to get to the shore. We were busily engaged in making the place habitable. Yet even thus early we became aware that our lot was even less to be desired than might have been imagined; for though, as a first step, we scraped away the odd patches of growth that studded the floors and walls of the cabins and saloon, yet they returned almost to their original size within the space of twenty-four hours, which not only discouraged us, but gave us a feeling of vague unease.

"Still we would not admit ourselves beaten, so set to work afresh, and not only scraped away the fungus, but soaked the places where

it had been, with carbolic, a canful of which I had found in the pantry. Yet, by the end of the week the growth had returned in full strength, and, in addition, it had spread to other places, as though our touching it had allowed germs from it to travel elsewhere.

"On the seventh morning, my sweetheart woke to find a small patch of it growing on her pillow, close to her face. At that, she came to me, so soon as she could get her garments upon her. I was in the galley at the time lighting the fire for breakfast.

"'Come here, John,' she said, and led me aft. When I saw the thing upon her pillow I shuddered, and then and there we agreed to go right out of the ship and see whether we could not fare to make ourselves more comfortable ashore.

"Hurriedly we gathered together our few belongings, and even among these I found that the fungus had been at work; for one of her shawls had a little lump of it growing near one edge. I threw the whole thing over the side, without saying anything to her.

"The raft was still alongside, but it was too clumsy to guide, and I lowered down a small boat that hung across the stern, and in this we made our way to the shore. Yet, as we drew near to it, I became gradually aware that here the vile fungus, which had driven us from the ship, was growing riot. In places it rose into horrible, fantastic mounds, which seemed almost to quiver, as with a quiet life, when the wind blew across them. Here and there it took on the forms of vast fingers, and in others it just spread out flat and smooth and treacherous. Odd places, it appeared as grotesque stunted trees, seeming extraordinarily kinked and gnarled—the whole quaking vilely at times.

"At first, it seemed to us that there was no single portion of the surrounding shore which was not hidden beneath the masses of the hideous lichen; yet, in this, I found we were mistaken; for somewhat later, coasting along the shore at a little distance, we descried a smooth white patch of what appeared to be fine sand, and there we landed. It was not sand. What it was I do not know. All that I have observed is that upon it the fungus will not grow; while everywhere else, save where the sandlike earth wanders oddly, pathwise, amid the gray desolation of the lichen, there is nothing but that loathsome grayness.

"It is difficult to make you understand how cheered we were to find one place that was absolutely free from the growth, and here

we deposited our belongings. Then we went back to the ship for such things as it seemed to us we should need. Among other matters, I managed to bring ashore with me one of the ship's sails, with which I constructed two small tents, which, though exceedingly rough-shaped, served the purposes for which they were intended. In these we lived and stored our various necessities, and thus for a matter of some four weeks all went smoothly and without particular unhappiness. Indeed, I may say with much of happiness—for—we were together.

"It was on the thumb of her right hand that the growth first showed. It was only a small circular spot, much like a little gray mole. My God! how the fear leaped to my heart when she showed me the place. We cleansed it, between us, washing it with carbolic and water. In the morning of the following day she showed her hand to me again. The gray warty thing had returned. For a little while, we looked at one another in silence. Then still wordless, we started again to remove it. In the midst of the operation she spoke suddenly.

"'What's that on the side of your face, dear?' Her voice was sharp with anxiety. I put my hand up to feel.

"'There! Under the hair by your ear. A little to the front a bit.' My finger rested upon the place, and then I knew.

"'Let us get your thumb done first,' I said. And she submitted, only because she was afraid to touch me until it was cleansed. I finished washing and disinfecting her thumb, and then she turned to my face. After it was finished we sat together and talked awhile of many things; for there had come into our lives sudden very terrible thoughts. We were, all at once, afraid of something worse than death. We spoke of loading the boat with provisions and water and making our way out on to the sea; yet we were helpless, for many causes, and—and the growth had attacked us already. We decided to stay. God would do with us what was His will. We would wait.

"A month, two months, three months passed and the places grew somewhat, and there had come others. Yet we fought so strenuously with the fear that its headway was but slow, comparatively speaking.

"Occasionally we ventured off to the ship for such stores as we needed. There we found that the fungus grew persistently. One of the nodules on the main deck became soon as high as my head.

"We had now given up all thought or hope of leaving the island. We had realized that it would be unallowable to go among healthy humans, with the thing from which we were suffering.

"With this determination and knowledge in our minds we knew that we should have to husband our food and water; for we did not know, at that time, but that we should possibly live for many years.

"This reminds me that I have told you that I am an old man. Judged by years this is not so. But—but—"

He broke off; then continued somewhat abruptly:

"As I was saying, we knew that we should have to use care in the matter of food. But we had no idea then how little food there was left, of which to take care. It was a week later that I made the discovery that all the other bread tanks—which I had supposed full—were empty, and that (beyond odd tins of vegetables and meat, and some other matters) we had nothing on which to depend, but the bread in the tank which I had already opened.

"After learning this I bestirred myself to do what I could, and set to work at fishing in the lagoon; but with no success. At this I was somewhat inclined to feel desperate until the thought came to me to try outside the lagoon, in the open sea.

"Here, at times, I caught odd fish; but so infrequently that they proved of but little help in keeping us from the hunger which threatened. It seemed to me that our deaths were likely to come by hunger, and not by the growth of the thing which had seized upon our bodies.

"We were in this state of mind when the fourth month wore out. Then I made a very horrible discovery. One morning, a little before midday, I came off from the ship with a portion of the biscuits which were left. In the mouth of her tent I saw my sweetheart sitting, eating something.

"'What is it, my dear?' I called out as I leaped ashore. Yet, on hearing my voice, she seemed confused, and, turning, slyly threw something towards the edge of the little clearing. It fell short, and a vague suspicion having arisen within me, I walked across and picked it up. It was a piece of the gray fungus.

"As I went to her with it in my hand, she turned deadly pale; then a rose red.

"I felt strangely dazed and frightened.

"'My dear! My dear!' I said, and could say no more. Yet at my words she broke down and cried bitterly. Gradually, as she calmed,

I got from her the news that she had tried it the preceding day, and—and liked it. I got her to promise on her knees not to touch it again, however great our hunger. After she had promised she told me that the desire for it had come suddenly, and that, until the moment of desire, she had experienced nothing towards it but the most extreme repulsion.

"Later in the day, feeling strangely restless, and much shaken with the thing which I had discovered, I made my way along one of the twisted paths—formed by the white, sandlike substance—which led among the fungoid growth. I had, once before, ventured along there; but not to any great distance. This time, being involved in perplexing thought, I went much further than hitherto.

"Suddenly I was called to myself by a queer hoarse sound on my left. Turning quickly I saw that there was movement among an extraordinarily shaped mass of fungus, close to my elbow. It was swaying uneasily, as though it possessed life of its own. Abruptly, as I stared, the thought came to me that the thing had a grotesque resemblance to the figure of a distorted human creature. Even as the fancy flashed into my brain, there was a slight, sickening noise of tearing, and I saw that one of the branchlike arms was detaching itself from the surrounding gray masses, and coming towards me. The head of the thing—a shapeless gray ball, inclined in my direction. I stood stupidly, and the vile arm brushed across my face. I gave out a frightened cry, and ran back a few paces. There was a sweetish taste upon my lips where the thing had touched me. I licked them, and was immediately filled with an inhuman desire. I turned and seized a mass of the fungus. Then more, and—more. I was insatiable. In the midst of devouring, the remembrance of the morning's discovery swept into my amazed brain. It was sent by God. I dashed the fragment I held to the ground. Then, utterly wretched and feeling a dreadful guiltiness, I made my way back to the little encampment.

"I think she knew, by some marvelous intuition which love must have given, so soon as she set eyes on me. Her quiet sympathy made it easier for me, and I told her of my sudden weakness; yet omitted to mention the extraordinary thing which had gone before. I desired to spare her all unnecessary terror.

"But, for myself, I had added an intolerable knowledge, to breed an incessant terror in my brain; for I doubted not but that I had seen the end of one of these men who had come to the island in the

ship in the lagoon; and in that monstrous ending I had seen our own.

"Thereafter we kept from the abominable food, though the desire for it had entered into our blood. Yet our dread punishment was upon us; for, day by day, with monstrous rapidity, the fungoid growth took hold of our poor bodies. Nothing we could do would check it materially, and so—and so—we who had been human, became— Well, it matters less each day. Only—only we had been man and maid!

"And day by day the fight is more dreadful, to withstand the hunger-lust for the terrible lichen.

"A week ago we ate the last of the biscuit, and since that time I have caught three fish. I was out here fishing tonight when your schooner drifted upon me out of the mist. I hailed you. You know the rest, and may God, out of His great heart, bless you for your goodness to a—a couple of poor outcast souls."

There was the dip of an oar—another. Then the voice came again, and for the last time, sounding through the slight surrounding mist, ghostly and mournful.

"God bless you! Goodbye!"

"Goodbye," we shouted together, hoarsely, our hearts full of many emotions.

I glanced about me. I became aware that the dawn was upon us.

The sun flung a stray beam across the hidden sea; pierced the mist dully, and lit up the receding boat with a gloomy fire. Indistinctly I saw something nodding between the oars. I thought of a sponge—a great, gray nodding sponge— The oars continued to ply. They were gray—as was the boat—and my eyes searched a moment vainly for the conjunction of hand and oar. My gaze flashed back to the—head. It nodded forward as the oars went backward for the stroke. Then the oars were dipped, the boat shot out of the patch of light, and the—the thing went nodding into the mist.

BOOKED & PRINTED

by Mary Cannon

Illustration by Istvan Banyai



Kate Green's first novel, *Shattered Moon*, was nominated for an Edgar. Her second book deserves to win. **Night Angel** (Delacorte, \$15.95, 282 pp) is a mesmerizing tale of suspense that opens when Maggie Shea returns to San Francisco for a memorial service; one of her former Berkeley housemates, her best friend from those days in the late sixties, has apparently been lost at sea. Memories rush at Maggie as she is reunited with the other woman and the three men with whom she shared a house in those college days. But along with the nostalgia come some very disturbing recollections and some unanswered questions. Shining characters, a rich plotline, and a heart-clutching narrative style add up to an exceptional work.

Jill Churchill's **Grime and Punishment** (Bantam, \$3.50, 185 pp) introduces suburbanite sleuth Jane Jeffry, an irresistible single mom who—quite rightly, too!—finds nosing into her neighbor's business a lot more fun than waxing the kitchen floor. When a "Happy Helper" cleaning lady is strangled with a vacuum cleaner cord in Jane's best friend's house next door, Jane begins to ferret out her friend's darkest secrets—at the same time trying to keep her own under wraps. Written with a generous helping of wit, Churchill leaves us eagerly awaiting the promised sequel, *A Farewell to Yarns*. Don't you love it?

Jonathan Gash's latest "Lovejoy" caper whisks our dubious hero

off to exotic Hong Kong, the setting for **Jade Woman** (St. Martin's, \$17.95, 273 pp). He has barely set foot—reluctantly at that—on foreign soil when he's robbed. Now our man's in a real jam: no friends, no money, and not one word of Chinese to his credit. But you know Lovejoy—it isn't long before he's fallen in with the Hong Kong mafia, taken food from a leper, and taken rooms with a fellow Briton who supports himself by working as a high-class "escort." For those of you who already appreciate Lovejoy's escapades, *Jade Woman* may prove to be your all-time favorite. And as always, the art and antiques background is alone worth the price of the book.

Kinsey Millhone's in the soup again—the alphabet soup, that is, in Sue Grafton's latest, **"F" Is for Fugitive** (Holt, \$15.95, 261 pp). The case is intriguing from the beginning, having its roots buried in the truth surrounding a murder seventeen years past. At that time a wild young teenager was strangled, and her boyfriend confessed to the crime. A year later he escaped from prison. Now Bailey Fowler is back in jail; this time, however, he claims he was innocent, and his father hires the Southern California P.I. to prove it. A small coastal town makes an evocative background to an investigation that explores family relationships and a close-knit community's secrets.

Jane Langton's witty Yankee mysteries are always entertaining, but fans should find **Murder at the Gardner** (Penguin, \$3.95, 353 pp) one of her finest. Homer Kelly is on his own this time; wife Mary is studying at an out-of-state university. Langton usually picks a small corner of the world as a setting, and then lovingly limns it, complete with her own pen-and-ink sketches throughout the text. This time the action takes place almost entirely within the Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum in Boston, a real site, the actual home of an eccentric patroness of art who willed her house and its contents to the people as a museum. Apparently harmless pranks motivate the museum's board to call in Homer as a consulting sleuth, which puts him on hand when the mischief turns to murder. Penguin has also reissued the first book in this series, the delightful *The Transcendental Murder* (\$3.95, 278 pp). Pick up both!

Kate Wilhelm writes science fiction, and it serves her well in her latest mystery featuring Charlie Meiklejohn and his wife, Constance Leidl. **Smart House** (St. Martin's, \$16.95, 266 pp) is the name Gary Elringer has given his computer gadgetry. Gary invites his partners and his estranged wife to the house's debut weekend. Then he bullies everyone into playing a game of "Murder," hoping

to prove how "smart" is the house's security system. When the obnoxious Gary is actually killed, it looks as if the house may have claimed its first victim. That's when the company's partners—all guests that fatal weekend—hire Charlie and Constance to return with them to the house and to find the real killer. This is cleverly plotted and peopled with fully drawn characters; I recommend it.

I'm seeing more excellent mysteries being published as paperback originals these days. Such is Al Guthrie's **Private Murder** (Bantam, \$3.50, 216 pp). The setting is a Chicago suburb, where Walter "Mac" McKenzie lives alone after the brutal murder of his wife. His home is on a cul-de-sac which he shares with a friendly spinster named Henrietta. It's a painful kind of *déjà vu* then when Henrietta is killed, and Mac befriends Abby—Henrietta's younger sister who has just come out from California for a visit—out of pity. He's surprised to find pity turning to something else, which is what motivates him to begin sleuthing on his own when Abby appears to be the cops' best suspect for the crime. This is original, fresh, and credible, with characters who are easy to be with and a setting that's different enough from the big-city "mean streets" to be an added novelty. I hope we'll see more of "Mac."

Another wonderful paperback original is Liza Bennett's **Madison Avenue Murder** (Worldwide, \$3.50, 254 pp). The setting this time is a bigtime advertising agency in the heart of New York's Madison Avenue. Peg Goodenough, narrator and heroine, is assistant art director and good friend to her mentor and boss, the flamboyant Ramsey Farnsworth. Then Farnsworth is brutally murdered in his Manhattan apartment. The media is making much of Farnsworth's homosexuality; Peg's boyfriend's father is making political hay of the police's inability to solve the crime; and Peg's bosses are making her do all the work—without the pay. This is breezy good fun, with Peg's brassy New York attitudes and lifestyle adding greatly.

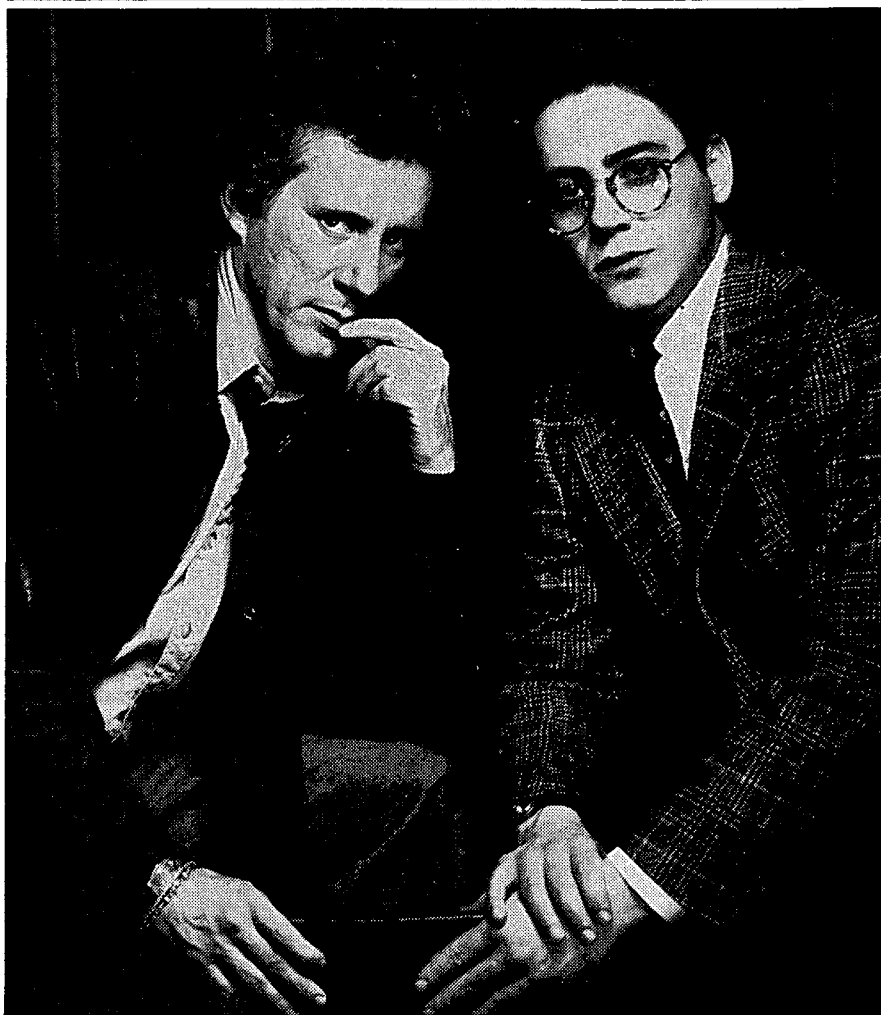
Trade paperbacks are also coming out with some new novels by new authors, and one of the best to come to my attention lately is Diana McRae's **All the Muscle You Need** (Spinsters/Aunt Lute, \$8.95 282 pp). Eliza Pirex is a licensed private investigator, a lesbian, and the sole support of the beautiful Honor and her two kids. Eliza is fairly content with her lot, which is why she feels so sorry for her latest client, Eileen Goldeen. Eileen is well-to-do and married to a possessive man, but she longs for the excitement and glamor she remembers having when she was friends with Ruthie.

So—against her better judgment—Eliza begins her search for the missing Ruthie, a woman whose brief presence seems to have touched a number of other lives, and set them all spinning. A multilayered plot and a complex portrait of Ruthie (who dominates the tale in the way Rebecca does) make this a solid read.

The newest Sharon McCone adventure is Marcia Muller's **There's Something in a Sunday** (Mysterious Press, \$15.95, 213 pp), and it's intriguing. Sharon agrees to a tail job for a long-time client of her firm, the All-Souls Law Cooperative. She shadows the visiting ranchhand, then finds she's unable to turn over her report to her client. He's been murdered. McCone's investigation takes her to a small town in the desert, and deep into the park shelters of San Francisco's street people. As always, McCone handles the case with compassion and a no-nonsense attitude that rarely hides a very big heart and a good-sized brain. One would certainly choose McCone were one in need of a private eye.

Ellis Peters has long entertained mystery lovers with her Brother Cadfael series. The latest, **The Confession of Brother Haluin** (Mysterious Press, \$15.95, 164 pp) can be thought of as one of the best. The setting is Shrewsbury in 1142, and this part of England is groaning under a bitter, snow-laden winter. While repairing the tiled roof, Brother Haluin falls and suffers crippling injuries, making a sickbed vow to go on a personal pilgrimage if he recovers. When he does, he is determined to begin his journey, and Brother Cadfael agrees to accompany him. Thus begins a fascinating trip into the neighboring county—and into the secrets of the monk's past.

Marjorie Dorner's **Family Closets** (McGraw-Hill, \$17.95, 304 pp) takes us to rural Wisconsin, and the dairy farms and tightly-knit communities of German immigrants. This is where Barbara Mullins grew up. Now she's back to help her widowed mother get settled into her new apartment. It's a trying time for Barbara, who is grieved that her family land has been sold and the house pulled down. But there's worse to come when the house-razing unearths a skeleton long buried in the basement, and the remains are identified as those of Barbara's father's older brother, Tony. Barbara can't help but begin to question the neighbors who might set her mind at rest, assure her that her beloved dad was incapable of fratricide. A fascinating portrait of rural America in World War II, and of how an entire town can suffer at the hands of one of its own.

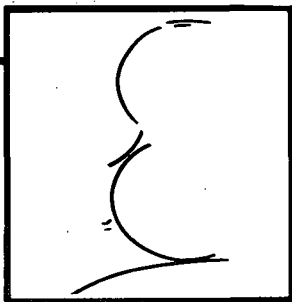


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James Woods and Robert Downey, Jr., star as attorneys investigating an eight-year-old murder in *True Believer*.

MURDER BY DIRECTION

by William Heller



Early on in *True Believer* there are two murders. The first, shown in a grainy, black and white scene, is a shooting on a crowded street in New York's Chinatown. The other, in living color, is a fatal stabbing during a fight in a prison chapel.

It becomes attorney Eddie Dodd's job—his mission—to free Shu Kai Kim, the man convicted of the first and, eight years later, caught committing the second. Dodd, played by James Woods, is a graying pony-tailed lawyer, a former hero to the radical set. He's a relic from the sixties who seems to have gone through too many causes and held too many press conferences to still believe in his own hype.

Roger Baron, an eager-beaver barrister fresh from law school, believes the hype. The

scrub-faced, preppie-looking Baron, played by Robert Downey, Jr., tells Dodd, "I've read every brief you wrote in the sixties." He practically gushes over the "Chase Manhattan bombing case," a worshipful reference to one of Dodd's famous courtroom triumphs.

It's been ten years since that case, "a long time," says Dodd, and today he pays the rent by defending drug dealers, not championing causes. Baron has come to New York, he reminds his would-be mentor, to work for him. He finds himself faced with a law office filled with low-lives looking for cheap legal counsel—the guilty ones.

Until one evening, when two Asian women, a mother and her translator, come to the office to plead with Dodd to defend the son, Shu Kai Kim. Dodd, who's long ago traded his causes for

cynicism, is at first skeptical of the mother's claim that her son was wrongly convicted of murder. Of the recent prison killing, it was self-defense, she says. Baron, his young charge, is ready to dive headlong into the case.

Following a visit to Sing Sing to speak with the sinister-looking Kim (Yuji Okumoto), the two lawyers begin their work to clear the convict of the Chinatown killing.

To get to the truth behind that crime, the pair follow a long and winding road which leads them to Nazis; art supply stores; late, covert nights in police property rooms; and, finally, to a high-level coverup. To further complicate matters, their best witness, a man who saw the murder and says their client didn't do it, also believes the telephone company was behind the murder of President Kennedy.

During the course of the investigation Dodd and Baron both waver in their belief in Kim's innocence. But almost like tag-team wrestlers, the two work well together. Just when Dodd is convinced, after a lead turns dead end, that Kim is merely another guilty man,

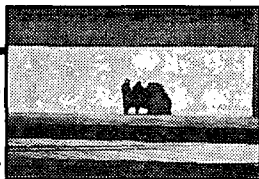
Baron picks up the fight. When the young lawyer is ready to toss in the towel, Dodd flies in with the fervor of his own idealistic youth.

This tale of murder and the unraveling of its coverup is an enticing one. It contains its share of false leads, but they are introduced as logical possibilities, not gratuitous curve balls tossed only to send the audience off track.

James Woods throws himself into this role. He's a live wire ready to go off at any time, but he also has an ability to see humor in even the most dangerous situations. Robert Downey provides a good contrast with his performance as the idealistic young attorney seeking "truth, justice and the American Way," much as cub reporter Jimmy Olsen did in *Superman*. The perky, charming Margaret Colin plays private investigator Kitty Greer, the third wheel of our investigative team, but she isn't used as effectively as she might have been. Yuji Okumoto rightly plays convict Shu Kai Kim mostly with a stone face, not allowing himself any emotion or hope after already serving years in prison for a murder he says he did not commit.

THE STORY THAT WON

The February Mysterious won by G. Mullen Cox of Honorable mentions go to Florida; Martha Ann Robgia; Cheryl A. Browne of Pamela L. Stephens of Corpus Christi, Texas; Steve Kaye of Panorama City, California; Lane Olinghouse of Everett, Washington; Sheila Munro of Edmonton, Alberta, Canada; Byron R. Carpenter of Bountiful, Utah; Jonathan Schaer of Passaic, New Jersey; Norman Viking of Tampa, Florida; and Roberta Sloan of Anchorage, Alaska.



Photograph contest was Somerville, New Jersey. John Begany of Orlando, ertson of Rocky Face, Georgia; Port Chester, New York;

THE TELLTALE TAIL TALE by G. Mullen Cox

A sixth sense had told her she'd been followed, shadowed, tailed, and he was there on the elevated platform with her as the rising sun sent shafts of shadows across the wooden flooring.

When she turned, he was standing beside her, his coat collar turned up, his hands jammed in his pockets, cap pulled almost over his eyes.

Involuntarily, she gasped. Yes, it was the same man who'd followed her from the coffee shop though she'd ducked down a side street, gone through the back door of Krauzmier's Bakery and out the front, slipped through the alley by Yuck Fooey's Chinese Restaurant hearing his footsteps racing behind her, clambered through a storm sewer pipe she'd known as a child, up the steel steps of the volunteer firehouse, down the ladder, through the woods by the soccer field, over the embankment, but she realized with dread that she hadn't thrown him off, hadn't eluded him.

Now he faced her, steely blue eyes, showing bared teeth, panting heavily as she fished in her bag for a nail file, something, anything.

He snarled, "Are you going to Peoria?"

She nodded dumbly.

"The guy in the coffee shop told me to follow you. That's some heck of a shortcut to the railroad station."

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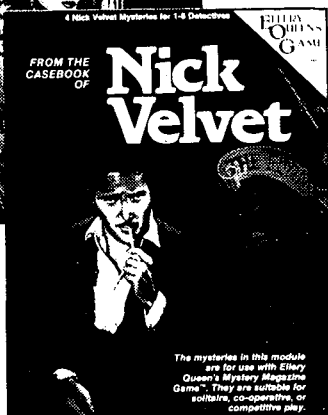
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